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# **Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan**

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***40 Years***  
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## **PREFACE**

**This report presents the findings of a study on the Soviet army in Afghanistan undertaken by the Arroyo Center of The RAND Corporation for the Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, U.S. Army. The primary analytical effort of the study focuses on key factors affecting the morale, discipline, motivation, and cohesion of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, rather than on strictly operational analysis. The analysis is based on extensive interviews with 35 former members of the Soviet armed forces who served in Afghanistan, augmented by a comprehensive search of the Soviet military literature. This study is unique in that it is the first analytical examination of the Soviet armed forces under conditions of war in the post-World War II period that incorporates a substantial body of firsthand information.**

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# **SUMMARY**

## **STUDY OBJECTIVE**

The war in Afghanistan, now in its ninth year and already the longest war in Soviet history, has presented military analysts and Soviet experts with a unique opportunity to gain insights into Soviet political and operational behavior in a military conflict. Dozens of books and hundreds of articles dealing with the war and the Afghan resistance have already been published. Nonetheless, some important aspects of Soviet military conduct have remained largely unexplored. One of these aspects concerns the key factors affecting the battlefield performance of a military establishment at war, such as morale, motivation, cohesion, and discipline. This study examines these factors within the framework of a broader investigation of the strengths and weaknesses of the Soviet army, as demonstrated in Afghanistan, and their implications for the Soviets and the West.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

The most important data source for this study was a series of interviews with 35 former Soviet servicemen who had firsthand experience in Afghanistan. The interviewees represent a wide variety of military specialties, ranks, and ethnic backgrounds, and we made a conscious effort to tailor the questions to each one's specific experience. We also took care to elicit responses on matters of fact, rather than opinion. Although this small sample has some inherent limitations, the project, to the best of our knowledge, is the first systematic effort to incorporate a substantial body of firsthand information into an analytical study of the Soviet armed forces under conditions of war. Information provided in the interviews was augmented and cross-referenced by an extensive survey of the Soviet military literature on Afghanistan. Finally, the analysis also benefited from interviews with Afghan resistance leaders and former officers.

## **MAJOR FINDINGS**

The study produced several interesting insights into the structure and characteristics of the Soviet expeditionary force. Soviet troops in

Afghanistan can be divided into two functionally distinct groups: occupation forces and counterinsurgency forces. The former comprise about 80 percent of the total troops and include most of the regular motorized rifle units and a variety of support formations. These units perform primarily security and support duties, although they occasionally participate in conventional search and destroy missions and large sweeps against the resistance. Most of the sweeps, however, are performed by the much better trained and motivated airborne, air-assault, and reconnaissance units that conduct virtually all counterinsurgency operations. These units are responsible for much of the observable improvement in Soviet performance.

Differences between these two types of units are not limited to operations but are also evident in a number of other areas, including recruitment and training. The counterinsurgency forces are carefully selected on the basis of criteria such as a clean political record, athletic ability, and psychological stability and are subjected to rigorous specialized training. Most of the counterinsurgency troops appear to be of Russian or Slavic background, and many are volunteers. The regular forces and support forces, on the other hand, are a much more mixed group who receive relatively little training beyond boot camp. They include conscripts with criminal backgrounds and violators of military regulations who have been sent to Afghanistan in lieu of court-martial. The desire to avoid stationing in Afghanistan has markedly exacerbated the endemic corruption characteristic of Soviet military draft boards.

The report examines and addresses at length the major factors that have a negative effect on morale and discipline:

- *Indoctrination.* Given the emphasis on political indoctrination in the Soviet army, psychological preparation and motivation of the troops for service in Afghanistan is surprisingly poor and possibly even counterproductive.
- *Personnel relations.* The traditional antagonistic relationship between first- and second-year soldiers has become even more pronounced under the conditions of war and serves to undermine unit cohesion and discipline, especially in the occupation forces. Personnel conflicts of an ethnic nature, particularly between Soviet Muslims and the Slavic majority, are also a continuing problem.
- *Drugs and alcohol.* Drug usage has become widespread; more than 50 percent of Soviet personnel are said to be regular users. Apart from its direct impact on military performance, drug

abuse is likely to have a negative long-term effect on Soviet society.

- *Quality of life.* Extremely poor hygiene, inadequate living conditions, and isolation contribute to serious health and morale problems.
- *Atrocities and looting.* Officially sanctioned reprisals and brutality against the civilian population in contravention to internationally accepted norms of warfare conduct are common. "Freelance" looting and atrocities, however, are strongly discouraged, and those who engage in them are punished severely.
- *Theft and corruption.* Theft, black-market activities, and smuggling are widespread throughout the Soviet armed forces.

These and other factors cause a variety of discipline infractions ranging from absences without leave and insubordination to desertion, fragging, and suicide. Although these problems are more prevalent among the occupation forces, they affect the entire force and have a negative impact on military performance. The specific operational significance of this impact, however, is difficult to assess.

## IMPLICATIONS

The war in Afghanistan is a unique conflict that is of marginal direct relevance to a major East-West confrontation. A number of the difficulties encountered by the Soviets in Afghanistan are conflict-specific and would not be likely to play much of a role in other war scenarios. Nonetheless, the Soviet war effort in Afghanistan reveals a number of possible systemic vulnerabilities in armed forces personnel relations, ethnic cleavages, and political motivation and indoctrination that may be relevant to an East-West conflict. A better understanding of these is needed, and possible Western exploitation strategies in specific types of conflict should be explored.

In the present conflict, the Soviets have generally been able to contain serious problems through specific force employment strategies and discipline maintenance policies. Despite these problems, Soviet military performance in Afghanistan showed improvement, particularly in its counterinsurgency dimension, as long as air dominance was maintained. However, the introduction of effective antiaircraft weapons into the resistance arsenal in 1986 precipitated a gradual decline in Soviet performance, and by late 1987 the Soviets appeared to be bogged down militarily, their prospects for victory distant.

Finally, the conflict in Afghanistan demonstrates that Soviet conduct in a war is motivated by military/political objectives, rather than by moral/ethical or contractual considerations. The Soviets cannot be confidently expected to abide by treaties and conventions in a war if military imperatives dictate otherwise.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A project of this nature cannot be successfully completed without the assistance of many individuals. Throughout the research and production phases of this study, I have received generous assistance and advice from many friends, colleagues, and associates, which I gratefully acknowledge here. In particular, I am indebted to Paul Henze, Michael Sadykiewicz, S. Enders Wimbush, and Sergei Zamascikov for their insightful comments and criticisms on an earlier draft of this report. Sergei Zamascikov also played a key role in the interviewing effort and provided invaluable assistance and counsel at all stages of the research. I would also like to thank Alyona Grinberg, Irina Rabinovicz, and Sally Stoecker for expert research assistance in processing interview transcripts and scanning hundreds of articles from the Soviet press. Sally Stoecker also conducted several interviews. I have benefited greatly from the advice and expertise of Lyudmilla Thorne, Director of Freedom House, a New York human rights organization, who has worked tirelessly on behalf of Soviet prisoners of war in Afghanistan. My secretary, Diane Kelly, ploughed expertly and in good humor through several revisions to prepare the manuscript for publication. My thanks also to my editor, Janet DeLand, for her customary thoroughness in blunting my frequent assaults on the English syntax.

Last but not most, I would like to express my gratitude to the former Soviet servicemen who graciously agreed to share with us their first-hand knowledge and frequently painful experiences in Afghanistan. For understandable reasons, they prefer to remain anonymous. Finally, I am deeply indebted to many friends in the Afghan resistance for providing us with their own unique perspective on the Soviet army and for assisting the project in other important ways.

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## GLOSSARY

**Afghantsy** (lit., Afghans): Soviet slang for veterans from Afghanistan.

**agitotryad** (short for *agitatsionno-propagandistkii otryad*): Agitation and propaganda detachment, a kind of psychological operations unit.

**anasha**: A type of marijuana.

**Basmachi**: Central Asian anti-Soviet insurgents of the 1920s; the term is now widely used by the Soviets with respect to the Afghan mujahideen.

**blokirovka** (lit., blocking): A Soviet combined-arms operation intended to surround the enemy.

**BMD** (*boevaya mashina desanta*): Landing forces personnel carrier.

**BMP** (*boevaya mashina pekhoty*): Tracked armored personnel carrier.

**BRDM** (*boevaya razvedivatelna-dozornaya mashina*): Combat reconnaissance vehicle.

**bronya** (lit., armor): Soviet army slang for BTR (see below).

**BTR** (*bronetransporter*): Wheeled armored personnel carrier.

**Bury** (lit., Boer): Soviet army slang for the 303-cal Lee Enfield rifle used by the Afghan resistance.

**chaddor**: Veil.

**chars**: A type of opium.

**cheffir**: An extremely concentrated form of tea used as a drug substitute by Soviet soldiers.

**chepe** (short for *chrezvichainoye proisshestviye*): An extraordinary occurrence; a severe breach of discipline or regulations.

**chernozhopy** (lit., black asses): Pejorative term for Central Asians.

**cherpak** (lit., ladle): A first-year soldier who has served more than 12 but less than 18 months.

**chizhik** (lit., little bird): A soldier who has served less than 6 months.

**churka** (lit., wood chip): An insulting term for Central Asians and other Muslims, denoting stupidity.

**ded, dedushka** (lit., grandfather): A second-year soldier who has served more than 18 months.

**dedovshchina** (lit., grandfatherliness): An unwritten rule in the Soviet army that allows second-year soldiers to dominate, abuse, and humiliate first-year conscripts.

**dembel** (short for *demobilizirovanyi*): A second-year soldier who has already received his discharge order but has not yet left the unit.

**desantnik**: Landing-forces soldier (used for both VDV and DShB troops).

**disbat** (*distsiplinarnyi batalyon*): Penal battalion.

**DOSAAF**: Voluntary Organization for Cooperation with the Army, Air Force, and Navy.

**DShB** (*desantno-shturmovaya brigada*): Air-assault brigade.

**dukhy** (lit., ghosts): Soviet army slang for the mujahideen first-year soldiers who have served less than 6 months.

**dushman** (lit., bandit, enemy): A Soviet propaganda term for the mujahideen.

**grach** (lit., rook): Slang for the SU-25.

**grazhdanin** (lit., citizen): Same as *dembel*.

**GRU**: Soviet military intelligence.

**GSM** (*goriuchee i smazochniye materialy*): Military fuel and oil service.

**guba** (short for *gauptrakhtha*): Stockade, brig.

**gubar**: Stockade inmate.

**inzibat** (*inzhinernyi batalyon*): Engineer battalion.

**kefir**: Slang for diesel fuel.

**KHAD**: Afghan security service.

**khan, khanka**: Opium.

**kishlak**: A small Afghan village (the same term is also used in Central Asia).

**koknar**: A heroin-like narcotic substance made by boiling poppy heads.

**kolkhoz**: Collective farm.

**komendatura**: The commandant's office, military staff, and administrative office in a city.

**konservy** (lit., cans): Mines.

**KShM** (*komandno-shtabnaya mashina*): Headquarters communications vehicle.

**markaz**: Fortified mujahideen base.

**miatorubka** (lit., meat grinder): Military slang for slaughter, massacre.

**molodoy**: Youngster, first-year soldier.

**mujahideen** (warriors for the faith, Dari): Afghan resistance fighters.

**nalivnik**: Fuel truck.

**natsmen** (short for *natsionalniye menshenstva*): Ethnic minorities.

**pchela** (lit., bee): Slang for the MI-8 helicopter.

**plamya** (lit., flame): Automatic grenade launcher.

**plan**: Hashish.

**pokupatel** (lit., buyer): Slang for an officer who picks up recruits from boot camp or an assembly point for his unit.

**praporshchik**: Warrant officer.

**razvedbataliyon**: Reconnaissance battalion.

**razvedrota**: Reconnaissance company.

**razvedchiki**: Reconnaissance troops.

**razvod**: Guard detail.

**rembat** (short for *remontnyi bataliyon*): Maintenance and repair battalion.

**RPG**: Rocket-propelled grenade.

**sanchast**: Medical detail.

**sanitar**: Medic.

**shakal** (lit., jackal): Enlisted men's slang for officers.

**Shuravi**: Dari term for Soviets.

**slon** (lit., elephant): Tank.

**sobaka** (lit., dog): Enlisted men's slang for officers.

**shmel** (lit., bumblebee): The MI-24 helicopter.

**spetsnaz** (short for *spetsialnoe naznacheneye*): Special-purpose forces.

**starik** (lit., old-timer, old man): A second-year soldier.

**stroibat** (*stroitelnyi bataliyon*): Construction battalion.

**uchebka**: Sergeants' training school (usually attended for 6 months).

**VDV** (*vozdushno-desantnaya voyska*): Airborne troops.

**veselyi** (lit., joyful, happy): The MiG-21.

**voenkom** (*voennyi komisar*): Military commissar; head of a military department office.

**voenkomat:** Military recruitment office.

**voentorg** (short for military trade): Military stores analogous to the U.S. PX.

**zampolit:** Political officer.

**zelenka** (lit., green patch): An area covered by vegetation, often used by mujahideen as a hiding place; a dangerous place.

# I. INTRODUCTION

The Soviet war in Afghanistan, now in its ninth year, has already lasted twice as long as the "Great Patriotic War," as the Soviets refer to World War II. It has become the longest counterinsurgency war in Soviet history and it qualifies as one of the bloodiest and most intractable guerrilla wars of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Despite a determined campaign, the Soviets have not achieved their major military and political objectives, and the Afghan people are continuing their resistance with undiminished vigor and growing effectiveness.

This protracted struggle has thus presented a unique opportunity for political observers and military analysts to gain a better understanding of Soviet conduct in a military conflict, and dozens of books and hundreds of articles dealing with the war have appeared in the past few years. Understandably, given the accessibility of firsthand information, most analyses have concentrated on the resistance aspect of the war.<sup>2</sup>

Only a few studies have addressed Soviet war conduct, and most of those have concentrated on broad Soviet military/political and strategic objectives rather than the operational dimension of the conflict. Virtually no unclassified studies have comprehensively examined Soviet army strengths and weaknesses as demonstrated in Afghanistan. However, it is not surprising that little has been written about the key factors that affect the overall performance of a military establishment at war, i.e., morale, cohesion, discipline, and motivation, since Soviet military authorities have traditionally been reluctant to provide reliable information on this sensitive issue. In addition, these factors are very difficult to examine with the analytical and technical tools available to the Western analyst.

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<sup>1</sup>The two longest counterinsurgency wars conducted by the Soviets prior to Afghanistan were the Basmachi insurgency (1919-1927) and the war against the Baltic partisans (1944-1952).

<sup>2</sup>The following are some of the best studies on the war in Afghanistan: Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1986; Joseph Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, Lexington Books, Lexington, Massachusetts, 1986; Edward Girardet, *Afghanistan: Occupation and Resistance*, Croom Helm, London, England, 1985; Nancy Peabody Newell and Richard S. Newell, *The Struggle for Afghanistan*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1981; John Fullerton, *The Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan*, Hong Kong, 1983; Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1983; Anthony Arnold, *The Soviet Invasion in Perspective*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1981; Christophe de Ponfiliy, *Le Clondestin*, Editions Robert Laffont, Paris, France, 1985; Jean-Christophe Victor, *La Cité des Murmures*, Editions J. C. Lattes, Paris, France, 1983.

This study attempts to provide some new insights into this largely unexplored area within the context of a broader analysis of the Soviet army in Afghanistan. Our emphasis is thus not on the operational or "lessons learned" aspects of Soviet war conduct, but rather on the factors that influence performance. We have also attempted to clarify some aspects of the war that are not well understood by Western analysts, including the types and missions of Soviet special forces and the processes of recruitment and training for Afghanistan. We have identified some specific strengths and weaknesses in the Soviet posture, and we have examined their implications for both the Soviet and U.S. armed forces, as well as those of other Western nations. Potentially exploitable Soviet vulnerabilities are indicated whenever possible.

Our most important data source for this study was a series of interviews with former Soviet servicemen. Indeed, the project was undertaken only after we became convinced that an interview effort was feasible.

We were able to interview 35 former Soviet servicemen from a variety of military specialties, ranks, and ethnic backgrounds, as shown in Table 1. Twenty-five of the respondents were interviewed at length by the author or his research associates; the interviews lasted from three to six hours. The remaining interviews were either conducted by others and made available to RAND or appeared in Western and Soviet underground (*samizdat*) publications. The interviews were generally tailored to the specific experience of the respondents, and a

**Table 1**  
**INTERVIEWEE SAMPLE**

Nationality	Rank	Military Specialties	Dates of Service
Russian (17)	Officers (1)	Reconnaissance	1950 (4)
Uzbek (6)	Sergeants (14)	Air-assault	1951 (5)
Ukrainian (3)	Privates (20)	Tank gunner	1952 (10)
Estonian (2)		Artillery	1953 and
Azeri (1)		Chemical reconnaissance	later (16)
Armenian (1)		Repair battalion	
Turkmen (1)		Driver-mechanic	
Lithuanian (1)		Sapper	
Jewish (1)		Communications	
Moldavian (1)		Infantry	
Ingush (1)		Construction	
		Demolition	



special effort was made to elicit responses on matters of fact, rather than opinion, in order to minimize bias. The interviews covered a broad range of issues, including:

- Recruitment.
- Training for Afghanistan and in Afghanistan.
- Types of units deployed.
- Types of operations participated in or observed.
- Details of daily life, such as living conditions, food, and health.
- Personnel relations.
- Ethnic problems.
- Drug and alcohol abuse.
- Types of discipline infractions.
- Atrocities and looting.

We are, of course, aware of the inherent limitations of our interview database. For example, we were not able to interview anyone who had direct knowledge of Soviet air operations, nor are there any representatives of the airborne units among our respondents. Further, the officer corps is represented by only one indirect interview. As a result, the study is far from comprehensive. In some areas, the results are likely to be impressionistic. Nonetheless, this interview approach has provided us with a wealth of valuable information that is virtually unobtainable by other methods. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first systematic analysis of the Soviet armed forces under conditions of war since World War II that incorporates a substantial body of first-hand information.

We have augmented our admittedly limited interview database with a comprehensive search of the Soviet military literature on the war in Afghanistan. Such writings, particularly in the specialized military publications, are numerous and have become remarkably informative in the past few years. Thus they represent an unusually rich source of information. In addition to analyzing over 300 articles in Soviet military periodicals and other media, we obtained information from Soviet television programs for the military, especially the weekly program "I serve the Soviet Union," and from Soviet and Western documentaries. We also examined relevant items in Soviet *samizdat* publications, in which the war has become a topic of major interest.

Finally, our analysis benefited from insights on Soviet military conduct provided in dozens of interviews conducted by the author with Afghan resistance leaders and former officers.

This report is organized into four major analytical sections: Section II examines the structure and characteristics of the Soviet forces,

focusing on recruitment, training, and the types of units and operations employed in Afghanistan. Section III details the key factors, such as quality of life and personnel relations, that affect morale and discipline. Finally, Section IV discusses the implications of the findings and summarizes our major conclusions.

## II. FORCE STRUCTURE AND CHARACTERISTICS

### RECRUITMENT AND STATIONING

Recruitment for service in Afghanistan generally follows established Soviet peacetime staffing procedures, with some important variations that have become more pronounced in the course of the war. A notable variation in staffing practices was observed during the assembly of the original invading force in the second half of 1979. Whether for reasons of expediency or surprise, or because it underestimated the potential resistance, the Soviet military leadership fleshed out understrength units with local reservists in areas of the Turkestan Military District adjacent to Afghanistan, rather than deploying combat-ready units for the initial thrust. As a result, the majority of the Soviet forces were made up of Muslim Central Asian reservists, many of whom had served in construction (*stroibat*) battalions or other support units. Considerable numbers of these troops probably lacked basic military skills, and they were not likely to have been highly motivated to carry out operations against the Afghan Muslims.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, then, overall Soviet military performance at the beginning of the war was generally assessed as less than impressive.<sup>2</sup>

One of our respondents who participated in the invasion confirmed the unusual ethnic makeup of these units. According to him, three-fourths of the soldiers who served with him in a motorized rifle regiment at Kushka, Turkmenia, on the border with Afghanistan, were Central Asians.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the Slavic and European soldiers who served with this respondent had been drafted at a special limited call-up in June 1979,

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<sup>1</sup>Numerous cases of fraternization among Soviet Muslims and the Afghans were reported during the initial invasion period. For a more detailed account of the role of Central Asian soldiers in the first phase of the war, see Part 5, "Soviet Muslim Soldiers in Afghanistan," in Alexander R. Alexiev and S. Enders Wimbush (eds.), *Ethnic Minorities in the Red Army: Asset or Liability?* Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1988.

<sup>2</sup>There have been some remarkably frank admissions of Soviet unpreparedness during the invasion. A recent article revealed that during the initial invasion, Soviet military drivers "had to learn how to drive in Afghanistan and even we the commanders were not always prepared to deal with the situation." (Lieutenant Colonel L. Mazurin and Major N. Moskal'ov, "Na linii ognya," *Kommunist vooruzhennykh syl*, No. 23, 1986.)

<sup>3</sup>Soviet Muslims presently make up less than 20 percent of the total population but more than 25 percent of the draft-age cohort. For details, see Edmund Brunner, Jr., *Soviet Demographic Trends and the Ethnic Composition of Draft-Age Males, 1980-1995*, The RAND Corporation, N-1654/1, February 1981.

two months after the normal spring call-up. They were then transferred directly to the Kushka regiment, which at the time of their arrival had only 120 of its normal manpower contingent of 1,800 to 2,000. The fleshing-out of the regiment—including the reported transfer of many officers from Soviet units in East Germany and Czechoslovakia—was completed by September, which would seem to indicate that the Soviet leadership had begun making contingency plans for an invasion as early as mid-1979, rather than September, as has been generally assumed.

After the invasion, recruitment policies followed standard practice. In the Soviet Union, draft-age youth are called in either November or April and are sent to basic training (eight to ten weeks) or sergeants' school (six months) in different parts of the country. After graduating and taking their military oath, the Afghanistan-bound recruits are sent to assembly points near several large Central Asian cities, including Ashkhabad, Tashkent, and Dushanbe, and from there are flown to Afghanistan. Most of them are then quartered temporarily at a large military camp near the Kabul airport until they are picked up, individually or in groups, by an officer (called a *pokupatel* (buyer) in army slang) from the unit of their final destination. Even recruits who have undergone their basic training in the immediate vicinity of the Afghan border are never sent to Afghanistan directly by road, probably because road travel in the country is unsafe. Two of our interviewees who were trained at Termez and Iolotan were sent by train to Ashkhabad and then by air to Kabul. We were also told of one case in which recruits were transported by helicopter from Termez to garrisons in the northern part of Afghanistan.

In most cases, the local *voenkomat* (military draft board) apparently decides who will serve in Afghanistan even before conscription. This practice, however, may be changing as a result of increasing corruption (discussed in more detail below). Less frequently, soldiers are selected for Afghanistan while they are already serving in other units.<sup>4</sup> The draftees are generally not told where they are to serve until the very last moment, although there are some exceptions. Several of our interviewees were informed that they were going to serve in Afghanistan only after the plane taking them there was airborne.

Some other unique aspects of the recruitment policies for forces in Afghanistan indicate special concern on the part of the authorities with the political and military implications of the conflict. For example, several of our respondents indicated that an effort is being made to

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<sup>4</sup>Such a case is described in Lieutenant Colonel G. Iliashenko, "Krutoi povorot," *Voennaya vershih*, April 1985.

prevent overrepresentation of urban youth, particularly from the large metropolitan centers, to avoid the negative political repercussions of excessive casualties. As one sergeant explained:

The Soviet government tries to distribute soldiers serving in Afghanistan so that soldiers from many different regions and the countryside are sent there. In this way few death notifications would come to each town.

With our limited interview data, it is not possible to prove or disprove the existence of such a policy. Nonetheless, there is some circumstantial evidence that points in the direction of such intent. A recent *Krasnaya zvezda* dispatch discussing a variety of problems in the *voenkomat* system in Leningrad mentioned the presence of 2,500 veterans from Afghanistan in the city. Given the total population of Leningrad (over 4 million, or roughly 1.5 percent of the Soviet population), this would indicate that the city is dramatically underrepresented among the *afghantsy*, who number more than a half-million. Similarly, Moscow, a city of 10 million, has only 7,000 Afghan veterans.<sup>5</sup>

There is considerably more evidence of both a voluntary and a penal aspect of stationing in Afghanistan. Both aspects are quite unusual in Soviet recruitment practice for the armed forces. Volunteers for service in Afghanistan are found among conscripts and officers alike, though much more often among the latter. Two main types of conscripts volunteer, according to former Soviet servicemen: those who seek adventure and are drawn by the glamorized, "macho" image presented in the Soviet media of soldiering in Afghanistan, especially in the airborne and commando-type units, and those who seem to be aware of the increasing privileges bestowed on Afghanistan veterans.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>See Lieutenant Colonel O. Nikonov, "U semi nyanek . . .," *Krasnaya zvezda*, August 1, 1987; and Colonel V. Filatov, "Kak zhivesh prizivnik," *Krasnaya zvezda*, October 22, 1987.

<sup>6</sup>A number of recent articles in the Soviet press have indicated that veterans are given preferential treatment in the allocation of apartments, admission to prestigious universities without entrance examinations, and assignment to desirable jobs. See, for example, "Pochta Krasnoi Zvezdy," *Krasnaya zvezda*, September 3, 1986, and "Obespechenie zhilyem," *Znamenets*, No. 9, 1986. Furthermore, there has been an unmistakable effort on the part of the authorities in the past two years to build up the image of the Afghan veteran as a new socialist hero. The following passage from an article on the *afghantsy* is indicative:

"Among my comrades-in-arms you will not encounter any money-grabbers or parasites, speculators or indifferent bureaucrats, shirkers or conformists. The notions of honesty, duty, patriotism, and humaneness are not abstract to them. They have entered into the flesh and blood of thousands of youths, our contemporaries, whom it befell to fight for high human ideals not with words but with deeds." (Serhiy Karanda, "Somknut riady odnepolchanie," *Molod Ukrainy*, June 10, 1986; see also Bohdan Nahaylo, "Soviet Afghanistan Veterans: The Emergence of a New Social Force," *Radio Liberty Research*, June 24, 1986.)

There are also a few individuals who are evidently attracted by the opportunity to make money through illegal dealings and to obtain Western consumer goods, which are said to be much easier to come by in Afghanistan than in the Soviet Union (see Section III).

For the officers who volunteer, the major incentive seems to be the opportunity for rapid promotion and the prospect of making a great deal of money, even without illegal dealings. Field-grade officers are reported to be attracted primarily by promotion opportunities, while the monetary incentive is often said to be the decisive motivation for the more junior officers. A case in which career incentives seem to have been the major consideration was described to us as follows:

My company commander was a captain who had served in Yemen and then was sent to the Ukraine. But he spent only a few months there and was transferred to Afghanistan. He did not want to go but they promised him that he would be given a major's position and would be able to go to the academy as a major. So he agreed and had to serve for a year in our unit before going to the academy.<sup>7</sup>

According to a captured Soviet first lieutenant, a lieutenant's salary increases from 210 to 600 rubles upon transfer to Afghanistan. Moreover, the rubles are worth much more than their nominal value, since salaries in Afghanistan are paid in special checks that entitle the payee to shop in foreign-currency shops in the Soviet Union. Like some of the soldiers, some officers see stationing in Afghanistan first and foremost as a chance to acquire cherished deficit goods.<sup>8</sup> In addition, one year of service in Afghanistan is said to count as three toward fulfillment of an officer's term.<sup>9</sup> In view of these enticements, it is likely

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A recent article in the quartermaster service journal *Tyl i snabzhenie* indicates that normal admission regulations for the prestigious Higher Military Academy of the Rear and Transportation Services are waived for Afghanistan veterans. Thus, while regular admission rules require candidates to be at least majors, company and battery commanders—i.e., captains or senior lieutenants—who have distinguished themselves in "fulfilling their internationalist duty" are also said to qualify. (See "Kak postupit v akademiya," *Tyl i snabzhenie*, No. 7, 1986.)

This attitude is confirmed in a *Krasnaya zvezda* article:

"When I served in Afghanistan, there was this lieutenant in our battalion who had just graduated from military school. I don't want to mention his family name. Maybe he has understood and reformed himself. Well, he came to us and his first question was not about the service, not about the people with whom he was going to go into battle, but how he could buy jeans and some other foreign trinkets. What is this, immaturity, political naivete or just stupidity? And here in our regiment one comes across such people who are not free from the influence of consumerism." (See V. Kosarev and V. Usoltsev. "Nashe nestareyushchee oruzhiye," *Krasnaya zvezda*, November 3, 1986.)

<sup>7</sup>The normal tour of duty in Afghanistan is one year for air force officers and two years for everybody else.

that many officers do volunteer. The attractions of service in Afghanistan for Soviet officers are summarized succinctly by a former soldier:

In the Soviet Union officers are concerned with regulations. Here the officers who come are interested only in money. For those who serve in Afghanistan, two years are equivalent to six in the Soviet Union. There you have to wait six years for a promotion—here only two but with three times the salary. So only greedy people volunteer for Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup>

While these incentives undoubtedly motivate many in the officer corps, their very existence may be an implicit admission by the Soviet authorities of the intrinsic unpopularity of the Afghan war. They may also be an indication of how thin the veneer of socialist idealism is, even within the military profession.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the volunteers are those who are sent to Afghanistan as a form of punishment. Virtually all of the former servicemen we talked to were aware of this practice. Four of them had themselves been sent to Afghanistan because of transgressions against military regulations. One had become a sergeant and had served more than a year in an airborne unit in the Baltic Military District when he was arrested for being AWOL for three days. Normally he would have been court-martialed and sent to the penal battalion (*shtrafbat*), but instead, he was transferred to a motorized rifle unit in Afghanistan. Another soldier, a recruit whose entire training unit of chemical reconnaissance specialists was sent to the Soviet forces in Germany, was kept behind with several others because of "bad behavior." Soon thereafter he was flown to Kabul. A third respondent explained his own case as follows:

Our unit was sent to Fergana to help with work on a *kolkhoz*. Many units were being used for farm work at that time. A few friends and I began selling cattle on the black market and would get drunk with the money we made. When we were caught, they transferred me to Afghanistan.

The fourth respondent, a demolition expert, believes that an officer with whom he did not get along arranged for him to be sent to Afghanistan:

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<sup>10</sup>There are apparently some who would go to Afghanistan even at the cost of serving at a lower position than their rank would warrant. An interesting article in the military journal *Sportskii voen* describes such a case involving three brothers who were serving in Afghanistan. One of them was said to have been granted a transfer, after three requests, as a battalion chief of staff, even though he was due to be promoted to battalion commander in a few months. His younger brother volunteered to be a platoon commander despite having already served as a company commander in the Far Eastern Military District. (See I. Dunin, "Bratya Anshovy," *Znameniets*, No. 8, August 1981.)

I had a very bad relationship with one of the officers in my platoon. We did not get along at all. I hated this officer so much that I told him, "If I ever get out of the army, I'll kill you." And he said, "Well, I'm going to send you to a place from which you will never return."

Another interviewee claimed that draftees with criminal records, who historically were assigned to serve in the construction troops, are now often sent to Afghanistan instead.<sup>11</sup> Even draftees against whom civilian court proceedings have been initiated are said to be shipped to Afghanistan without regard to the outcome of their cases. One former sergeant who claimed to know of such cases remarked:

Everybody is being drafted now, not only sick people but also criminals. For the most part, criminals are sent to serve in bad places inside the Soviet Union, such as Siberia and Central Asia. But criminals are sent to Afghanistan as well. Not only criminals, but also those that had committed a crime and were about to be put in jail. It is very interesting that the *voenkoms* do not take such things into consideration. There were some fellows whose cases had already been opened in court and who were going to jail. Their only salvation was to join the army and their cases would be dropped. The *voenkomat* would not allow anybody to put its draftees in jail.

Some officers apparently end up in Afghanistan because of tarnished records. The company commander of one of our interviewees was reportedly assigned to Afghanistan upon being demoted for chronic drunkenness. Similar cases have been revealed in the Soviet military press. In one case, a senior lieutenant was reported to have been sent to Afghanistan after being demoted for unspecified transgressions.<sup>12</sup>

Another recruitment practice for service in Afghanistan that differs from usual staffing policies is related to the ethnic factor in the Soviet army. After their initial experience with Central Asian troops during the invasion, the military recruitment authorities appear to have taken measures to limit the numbers of Soviet Muslims serving in combat units in Afghanistan. Most respondents agreed that less than 10 percent of the men in most of the operational units were Muslims. The proportion is even smaller in specialized counterinsurgency units. The proportion of Muslims in the ground forces units should actually be considerably higher, since Muslims presently constitute nearly one-

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<sup>11</sup>Some fascinating tidbits have been provided lately by the Soviet military media, indicating that the number of conscripts with criminal records is anything but negligible. A well-known military journalist, Colonel V. Filatov, recently revealed that as many as 40 percent of the personnel in some units enter the service with criminal records. (See "Eto nashi rebyata," *Krasnaya zvezda*, May 30, 1987.)

<sup>12</sup>See Major A. Deriyabin, "S vysokoi noty," *Krasnaya zvezda*, May 24, 1987.



third of the draft-age cohort, and they are less frequently drafted into the air force or the navy. On the other hand, sizable numbers of Muslim minorities apparently do serve in various support and *stroibat* units stationed in Afghanistan. Muslims and other minorities may in fact be overrepresented in these units. A captured list of personnel in a Soviet transportation company, provided to the author by resistance sources, shows 36 Muslim names among the 91 listed, and respondents serving in *stroibat* units claimed that more than 50 percent of the men in their units were Muslims. The likely rationales for this policy are suspected unreliability, poor technical skills, and language problems.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, smaller numbers of better-educated and perhaps more trusted Central Asians, especially Farsi-speaking Tajiks, are often used as interpreters and in psychological operations units, because of their linguistic skills and their knowledge of local customs and culture. (For details, see "Types of Units and Operations," below.)

Overall, Soviet recruitment policies in the post-invasion period appear to be adequate to the staffing needs of the expeditionary force. This is not surprising, in view of the fact that these forces do not exceed 3 percent of Soviet military manpower. Nonetheless, the war in Afghanistan has undoubtedly exacerbated problems that were endemic to the system even before the Soviet intervention.

The most intractable of the problems is likely to be the growing corruption in the *voenkomat* system. The military conscription offices have always had a reputation for corrupt practices and bribe-taking—*voenkomat* officers have been known to acquire small fortunes in exchange for favors ranging from temporary deferments and local assignments to evasion of the draft altogether. Such corrupt practices seem to have reached unacceptable levels as a result of the growing

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<sup>13</sup>According to one of our respondents, one-third of the Central Asians in his regiment who participated in the invasion either did not understand or pretended not to understand even basic Russian. Many spoke no Russian at all. Similar deficiencies in a sizable component of the Soviet draft-age cohort, which until recently were vehemently denied by Soviet officials and even by some Western analysts, are now openly admitted under Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*. A recent article in *Izvestiya*, for example, revealed that in Uzbekistan, "many recruits don't speak Russian well enough to serve anywhere but in manual-labor battalions that dig ditches or pave roads." (*Izvestiya*, December 10, 1986.) In parts of Kirgiziya, according to another report, between 20 and 40 percent of the draft-age youth do not speak Russian. (I. Kapichnikov, "Zavie't ot nas," *Sovetskii patriot*, November 4, 1987.) Moreover, it would appear that service in a Russian-intensive environment does not by itself guarantee the prompt acquisition of adequate language skills, as has been assumed by many analysts. "How can one speak of effective combat and political training," asks the *voenkom* of Uzbekistan, "if there exists a language barrier between commander and soldier that is not always overcome even by the end of the service term?" (E. Ribyak, "Prizivniku vnimanie," *Pravda vostoka*, October 13, 1987.)

unpopularity of service in Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> All of the Soviet soldiers we interviewed were familiar with these practices, either through direct experience or by hearsay. The following two cases are fairly typical:

My friend was in a basic training unit in T. One day his father was visited by a man in civilian clothes. He told him that his son had just graduated from a special training course and soon would be sent somewhere. He said that if the father gave him 2,000 rubles they would not send him to Afghanistan. However, the father was a teacher and did not have any money. So the guy went to Afghanistan.

At home in K. there was an Armenian colonel in the voenkamat office. His daughter was [dating] a friend of mine. He had an occasion to speak with her about me and she said, "O.K., get your friend to pay me 1,000 rubles and I'll arrange things with my father." I was pleased since it was usually necessary to pay 3,000 rubles. So I went home and explained things to my father. He got mad enough to choke me, but even so he agreed. Everything was going well and he got dressed to go to the savings bank to get the money. That was when my mother blocked the doorway and yelled, "No, don't do that, he has to go to the army." However, later on when I phoned her the first time from Ashkhabad, you should have heard her howl.

The widespread corruption is confirmed also by numerous interviews conducted by Radio Liberty's Audience and Opinion Research Section. Here is one example:

I had an acquaintance in the local military command who, for a large bribe, would arrange for people to be freed from military service. Not only did this facilitate their emigration to Israel, it saved them from having to serve in Afghanistan. The easiest way to avoid serving was to be certified as mentally retarded and get this confirmed by a medical commission. Over a period of seven years, I managed to help twelve of my relatives avoid their military obligations, for a price of 2,000 to 3,000 rubles per person.<sup>15</sup>

The problem has by now been openly acknowledged by the authorities—an indication of its seriousness. A recent *Krasnaya zvezda* dispatch details the story of the son of an influential newspaper editor in Uzbekistan who was originally assigned to Afghanistan, only to be

<sup>14</sup>It would appear that the pervasive corruption characterizing the voenkamats has reached the highest echelons of officials. There have been persistent reports, for instance, that the republican military commissar in Estonia, Major General Roomet Kiudmaa, has been arrested for accepting bribes. (See *The Economist Foreign Report*, July 30, 1987.)

<sup>15</sup>Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty (RFE-RL), *Soviet Background Notes*, SBN 4-1984.

promptly reassigned to a "very quiet" place. The article further alleges that a *voenkomat* in Uzbekistan kept a list of "privileged conscripts not to be called up."<sup>16</sup> There is little doubt that draft evasion among influential elites is a widespread, perhaps endemic phenomenon. For instance, only 6 of the 36 district (*rayon*) *Komsomol* (Youth Communist League) secretaries in Leningrad are reported to have served in the armed forces.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in Kazakhstan, "all first secretaries of the *rayon* committees of the *Komsomol*, but for an extremely rare exception, have not served in the army a single day."<sup>18</sup>

Another recent story on the subject of draft evasion revealed that in Tashkent, draftees failed to appear for their call-up and had to be hunted down by the police. "Recently," says the article, "it has been more frequently necessary to remind draftees that military service is mandatory for everyone."<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, participants at a recent conference in Georgia assessing how young Georgians have performed their "patriotic and internationalist duty" took local *voenkomats* to task for "failing to comply with implementation discipline in regard to call-ups."<sup>20</sup> Military authorities are evidently beginning to implement changes in an attempt to alleviate the problem. The military commissar of the Georgian republic recently disclosed in an interview that the responsibility for selecting recruits for "service abroad" has been taken away from city and *rayon*

<sup>16</sup>Colonel G. Ivanov, "Follow Up on the Letter: What's Behind the Perfunctory Reply," *Krasnaya zvezda*, July 11, 1986.

<sup>17</sup>See "U semi nyanek," *Krasnaya zvezda*, August 1, 1987.

<sup>18</sup>Colonel V. Filatov, "Eto nashi rebyata," *Krasnaya zvezda*, May 30, 1987.

<sup>19</sup>*Izvestiya*, December 10, 1986. There is mounting evidence from Soviet and other sources that popular disapproval of continued Soviet involvement in the war is growing throughout the country and is generating unprecedented antidraft sentiments among both draftees and their parents. In a recent poll of 1,000 Muscovites between the ages of 18 and 65, conducted by the Sociological Research Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in collaboration with the French polling organization IPSOS, 53 percent of the respondents were in favor of a total withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, while only 27 percent opposed any withdrawal at all. (See Christopher Walker, "Poll Reveals Most Russians Want Afghanistan Pull-Out," *The Times*, London, November 2, 1987.) Growing disenchantment with Soviet policies in Afghanistan is also documented in interviews with thousands of Soviet citizens traveling abroad, conducted by the Soviet Area Audience and Opinion Research (SAAOR) branch of Radio Liberty. (See Sallie Wise, "The Soviet Public and the War in Afghanistan: A Trend Toward Polarization," SAAOR, March 1987.) Demonstrations have been witnessed in front of *voenkomats* in the Baltic area, Erevan, Tbilisi, Astrakhan, and elsewhere, and calls for draft resistance have appeared in *samizdat* publications in Lithuania and Ukraine. Four Estonian draft-age youth who defected to Sweden cited their desire to avoid service in Afghanistan as the primary motivation for their escape. (For details, see Julia Wishnevsky, "The War in Afghanistan in Samizdat," *Radio Liberty Research*, July 22, 1985; Pierre Hank, "Otkaz ot voyennoi sluzhbi v SSSR," *Russkaya Mysl*, March 21, 1986; *Juventus Academica*, No. 2, 1985; and *Vesti iz SSSR/USSR News Brief*, No. 11/12-17, 1985.)

<sup>20</sup>*Komunisti*, Tbilisi, April 1, 1986.

*voenkomats* and placed under the jurisdiction of the republican commissariat.<sup>21</sup>

## TRAINING AND INDOCTRINATION

### Regular and Support Forces

The initial Soviet invading force went into Afghanistan in December 1979 with little, if any, special training for the type of warfare in which it was soon to engage. Training of the troops earmarked for Afghanistan proceeded along conventional lines, with the possible exception of some special-purpose units. One of the respondents recalled that the training in his tank battalion was geared exclusively to traditional tank warfare, except for limited hand-to-hand combat drills. As a result, the invading force was ill-suited for mountain and desert warfare and was sorely lacking in counterinsurgency skills.

After the initial phase of the war, a number of specialized training courses were introduced, and many, if not most, of the Afghanistan-bound personnel now undergo special training of one sort or another. One of the first changes introduced was the establishment of large basic-training facilities in the Turkestan Military District under topographic and climatological conditions similar to those of Afghanistan. Most of the new draftees now undergo basic training and acclimatization at training camps at Ashkhabad, Iolotan, Termez, Chardzou, Tashkent, and other sites in Central Asia. Rudimentary desert warfare skills are also taught in boot camp.

Considerable attention is also paid to preparation for operations in the mountains—terrain in which the Soviet expeditionary force experienced considerable difficulties in the early stages of the war. Mountain-warfare training centers have been set in Azerbaidzhan and Tajikistan, and probably elsewhere as well. All military drivers are presently trained to drive in the mountains before being sent to Afghanistan. Such training, according to a former serviceman who had acquired a driver's license from DOSAAF prior to his conscription, took three months and was very rigorous. The trainees were taught how to operate trucks and other vehicles on different types of mountain roads under all kinds of weather conditions, how to shoot from the march, and how to perform basic repair and maintenance procedures under combat conditions. Another respondent, an artillery sergeant, received extensive instruction in the operation of 122mm howitzers in mountainous conditions. Sappers are also trained under realistic topo-

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<sup>21</sup>*Zarya Vostoka*, April 15, 1986.

graphic and soil conditions, as well as on the specific types of mines they are likely to encounter.

After a soldier arrives in Afghanistan, the intensity of training is reported to taper off considerably. Most Soviet troops, with the notable exception of some special units (discussed below), apparently do not receive training on a systematic basis once they are deployed in their garrisons. Most of the training activities in Afghanistan are evidently aimed primarily at testing the combat-readiness and capabilities of the troops, rather than at imparting new skills. Typical exercises included combat alerts and nighttime forced marches of various durations. Former motorized rifle servicemen provided several examples, of which the following are fairly typical:

Sometimes we had training at night in Afghanistan. Once we had a 30 kilometer forced march without breaks. It lasted five hours. Sometimes we had these marches when somebody important arrived and they wanted to show off our training to the bigwigs from Moscow.

. . .

We had training at night in the DRA [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan]. We would be asleep and at 3 a.m. a combat alert would sound. We would hear the alert, dress quickly, grab a gun, run outside, and hide in a trench. If the unit does it quickly we would all go back to bed. If we do poorly, we would go back to bed for five minutes and another alert would sound. Even if only one person fouls up—fails to wake up or is too slow—we would all suffer.

Soldiers serving in construction battalions and other support units get even less combat training after they are deployed. Explained a former *stroibat* serviceman:

We had very little training in Afghanistan. We had to fulfill our plan, so work was more important than anything else. We had chemical warfare training once in a while, but seldom when we had a lot of work. When we did have such training we had to don and remove CW gear quickly and run a certain distance.

## Elite Units

Members of what could be called the elite operational units undergo much more rigorous and demanding training. There are three types of such units deployed in Afghanistan: the airborne (VDV), the air-assault troops (DShB), and the reconnaissance troops (*razvedchiki*).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup>These are generally the only units that engage in combat on a regular basis. The VDV (*vozdushno-desantnaya voyska*, literally air-landing troops) are also referred to as *parashutno-desantnaya voyska* (parachute-landing troops); DShB stands for *desantno-*

Airborne troops are normally subject to a careful selection process even before conscription. Qualities that are considered necessary for a VDV candidate include athletic ability, emotional stability, and a clean political background. Many of the recruits have already achieved a degree of mastery in sports such as boxing, wrestling, and the martial arts or have acquired paramilitary skills in skydiving or marksmanship in DOSAAF courses prior to being drafted. Others are selected from more conventional units during basic training. The VDV authorities apparently have the right to pick any recruit. One of our respondents recalled that VDV officers came to his motorized rifle regiment and spent a day looking over likely candidates, but only a few were selected.

Once selected, recruits are put through a very strenuous physical endurance program that includes 40-kilometer marches on a regular basis. In addition to parachute training, airborne soldiers acquire advanced skills in hand-to-hand combat, including karate (which is otherwise illegal in the USSR), and are taught survival techniques.<sup>23</sup>

The training of VDV officers is even tougher. A recent article describing the training at the VDV officer school at Ryazan notes that cadets must cover a distance of "several tens of kilometers" to their training center "on foot or on skis," and with "just a canteen of water" before the beginning of the daily training routine. Further, they are required to skydive in air temperatures as low as -25°C, jump into ice-cold rivers, and swim under water the surface of which has been set aflame. The training is said to be not only difficult but "to some extent dangerous." The commander of the school is reported to have further toughened the requirements after consultations with Afghanistat veterans.

The demanding training of the airborne troops is evidently continued in Afghanistan. The Soviet military press has reported that VDV units in Afghanistan regularly engage in live-ammunition exercises, 14-hour forced marches, and mountain-climbing training.<sup>24</sup>

Recruits drafted in the air-assault units generally have characteristics similar to those of the airborne conscripts, although they are a

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*shurmovaya brigada* (literally landing-assault brigades); and reconnaissance units are organized either in company (*razvedrota*) or battalion strength (*razvedbataliion*), although they often operate in smaller units in counterinsurgency operations.

<sup>23</sup>Details on VDV training are provided in Lieutenant General S. M. Smirnov, "Tak Prihodit Muzhestvo," Voenizdat, Moscow, 1985.

<sup>24</sup>For details see Major N. Kravchenko, "Po dolgu internacionalistov," *Voennyi vesnik*, No. 4, 1985; Lieutenant Colonel G. Iliashenko, "Krutoi povorot," *Voennyi vesnik*, No. 4, 1986; Major A. Petrenko, "Iz rodnika dushevnoi shchedrosti," *Komunist voprosnykh sil*, No. 19, 1986.

somewhat less select group.<sup>25</sup> Like the VDV conscripts, most of them had excelled in sports before entering the service, and most had clean records. Their training is also quite similar, except that not all DShB soldiers are parachute-qualified. One of our interviewees who served in a DShB unit provided some interesting details about his training. Although he had no inkling of where he would serve at the time he was drafted, as soon as he arrived at boot camp at Termez, he and the other soldiers in the same company were told that they would serve in an elite, special-purpose unit. In a significant departure from normal Soviet practice, all three commanding officers of the training company (the commander, the deputy commander, and the political commissar) were majors. Our interviewee was told that the majors were training them for their own units in Afghanistan. Many of the sergeants helping with the training were also Afghanistan veterans. Most of their tactical training had involved simulated combat in specially constructed models of Afghan villages and included hand-to-hand combat.

The reconnaissance troops are considered by many to be the cream of the crop of Soviet combat units in Afghanistan. A reconnaissance company is attached to every regiment, and a reconnaissance battalion is attached to each division in the Soviet armed forces, including the VDV and the DShB. The reconnaissance troops (*razvedchiki*) are usually selected from among the most capable personnel of a formation and have a definite elite status in the unit. The criteria on which they are chosen are said to include mental capacity, physical training, and moral/political qualities.<sup>26</sup>

Reconnaissance training is reported to be hard and continuous. A recent story examining a reconnaissance company's training and combat activities provides some interesting details. The commander of a company is said to have divided each platoon into several small groups, on the basis of the physical and psychological fitness of the personnel. The training process is organized in a way that allows all groups to come up to the level of the best. Nonetheless, only the groups that excel are selected for the "most difficult and responsible" missions. Training is said to include daily 19-kilometer runs, hand-to-hand combat, strength-building exercises, and special exercises designed to build up physical and psychological endurance.

This emphasis on specialized training has unquestionably resulted in a much better prepared and skilled Soviet combat force, a fact that has

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<sup>25</sup>Although DShB forces are discussed openly in military encyclopedias and other military reference books, their actual existence in the Soviet army has seldom been directly acknowledged. A recent exception is to be found in a small item accompanying a picture of airborne troops in *Krasnaya zvezda*, June 17, 1987.

<sup>26</sup>Captain S. Dushev, "Otsovski kharakter," *Znamenetsy*, No. 5, 1983.

been freely acknowledged even by the mujahideen for the past few years. This is not to say that the Soviets do not continue to experience serious training shortcomings, particularly among the regular motorized, tank, and other units. Our respondents described a great variety of shortcomings ranging from inability to operate equipment and weapons to inadequate physical preparedness and tactical skills. Occasionally, such weaknesses have surfaced in the Soviet military media as well. Recent articles have discussed poor driving skills of combat vehicle drivers and the difficulties encountered by Soviet soldiers in the mountains of Afghanistan. In an unusually negative assessment of some soldiers' abilities, a company commander who was also a Hero of the Soviet Union remarked:

Frankly speaking, some soldiers don't have the qualities necessary on the battlefield. They grew up in warmth and comfort and don't have sufficient physical training—it is risky to go into battle with them.<sup>27</sup>

### Indoctrination

While Soviet military authorities seem to have steadily improved the combat and technical skills of their forces in Afghanistan, especially the counterinsurgency units, the political and psychological preparation of the troops leaves much to be desired. It could even be argued that the political indoctrination to which Afghanistan-bound personnel are subjected may be counterproductive to enhanced military performance. The basic problem stems from the tremendous gulf between official Soviet propaganda regarding the war and the reality experienced by the Soviet soldier.

From the very beginning of the war, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was justified to Soviet servicemen as a legitimate aid to a fraternal regime under attack by foreign forces. A participant in the invasion recalled the message of political lectures given to the troops just prior to entry in Afghanistan as follows:

We were told by our political officers that out of the 26 provinces in Afghanistan only two or three were in the hands of the government. The rest of them were controlled by mercenaries or by bandits. The mercenaries, they said, were from China and the United States. And they told us that the Chinese were in the eastern part of Afghanistan. Also the weapons of the Afghan bandits were provided by China and the United States. We were being sent in to provide fraternal assistance to the Afghan people so they can live normal lives.

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<sup>27</sup>See Major A. Olinyk, "Posty v gorakh," *Krasnaya zvezda*, July 17, 1986; and Captain Ivan Dunin, "Komandir prinimai reshenie," *Sobesednik*, No. 10, March 1986.



This crude and rather uninspired propaganda line has been maintained ever since, with no visible effort being made to provide a more credible rationale for Soviet involvement. Virtually all of our respondents had heard variations on the same transparent tale of bandits and mercenaries while being briefed prior to deployment to Afghanistan. The following comments are typical:

We were told that we would have to help the Afghan people defend their revolution from foreign mercenaries. They said that there were many mercenaries from Pakistan, China, and the United States in the country.

Just before we went to Kabul, we were informed by our *zampolit* that we would have to fight Iranian and Pakistani forces that had entered the country from outside.

What we were told before arriving in Afghanistan was that we would be fighting primarily Chinese mercenaries dressed in Afghan garb.

As part of the indoctrination effort, Soviet troops are also given to understand that they have been invited by the Afghan people to defend them and to help rebuild their country. Soldiers in the training unit of one of our respondents, for example, saw a propaganda film in which Soviet soldiers provided construction and agricultural help to the Afghan peasants, including milking their cows. Thus, at least some Soviet soldiers evidently expected a friendly reception from the natives, or at least from the civilian population.

The reality of the situation in Afghanistan, as could be expected, is said to have promptly disabused most soldiers of any illusions they may have had regarding the official line. This process is evidently fairly short even for the most politically unaware conscripts. Two respondents, an artillery sergeant and a *stroibat* private, related their own experiences:

We were told that we are to render international assistance to the Afghan people and that we would fight against bandits and mercenaries who prevent normal people from leading normal lives. Well, pretty soon I had the impression that the bandits were all the Afghans and the Communists were a few thousand people in Kabul. I was in Afghanistan a whole year and did not see a single mercenary.

I knew very little about Afghanistan. I just knew that Soviet soldiers there were assisting the Afghans to build kindergartens, schools, and houses. Once I got there I saw right away that this was a big lie, nothing but lies.

Not only are the political justifications for the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, as presented to the troops, only marginally credible in themselves, they are apparently directly contradicted in practice. For example, Soviet military camps and other facilities are usually completely segregated from the local population, and the military personnel are warned to avoid any unofficial contact with the Afghans. In operational briefings, the soldiers are instructed to consider every Afghan, including women and children, as a potential enemy. Several interviewees reported being told, while participating in operations, that even the Afghan military could not always be trusted. Some Soviet officers went so far as to show open contempt for all Afghans in front of their soldiers, obviously regarding them as barely human savages.

The general reaction to such heavy-handed and implausible propaganda is said to be widespread cynicism among the rank and file. In at least some cases, however, the negative reaction is more severe and could bring about growing hostility toward the system. A number of our respondents told us that the process of questioning the system, which eventually led them to defect, first began upon realization of the extent of official demagoguery in Afghanistan.

Whatever the operational impact of such negative reactions—and it may be marginal, given the circumstances of this conflict—political indoctrination clearly does not enhance morale. This in itself is an interesting finding, since it has often been assumed that the pervasive Soviet preoccupation with political motivation and indoctrination in the military necessarily contributes to cohesion and morale. The demonstrated ineptness of the political indoctrination system to motivate Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan also seems to be a testimony to its inherent limitations and inability to overcome the built-in ideological rigidity of the philosophy that governs it. To that extent, problems in the indoctrination system are systemic and should be closely scrutinized by Western analysts seeking to identify vulnerabilities in the Soviet armed forces that might be exploitable under certain circumstances.

## **TYPES OF UNITS AND OPERATIONS<sup>28</sup>**

Since its initial thrust into Afghanistan, the Soviet expeditionary force has gradually expanded in size and refined its organizational

<sup>28</sup>The discussion in this section is not intended to provide a detailed operational analysis of the Soviet war effort; it deals with operations only to the extent necessary to examine the functional specificity of the various units and formations deployed in Afghanistan. The Soviet operational experience will be examined at greater length in a forthcoming RAND study by Alexander Alexiev, Gordon McCormick, and James Quinlivan.

structure and operational conduct for maximum performance under the specific circumstances of the war. Western estimates of the size of the Soviet "limited contingent" have varied over the war years from fewer than 100,000 to more than 200,000. Recent estimates from reputable sources have ranged from 118,000 to 150,000.<sup>29</sup> To these figures must be added another 30,000 to 50,000 combat and support troops operating from Soviet territory north of the Amu Darya river.

Organizationally, most of the Soviet units in Afghanistan are incorporated in the 40th Army, with operational headquarters in Kabul and logistics headquarters at Termez. The Soviet force includes several motorized rifle divisions, one airborne division and elements from a second, two or more air-assault brigades (DShB), and a variety of support units that may make up as much as 30 percent of the total force.

While the general Soviet order of battle is fairly well established—albeit a matter of continuing dispute in a number of areas—there is much less agreement on the role and missions of these conventional formations and their subunits in the unconventional war effort in which they are engaged. We have examined these issues in considerable detail and have derived insights from both the interview data and the Soviet literature.

For analytical purposes, the Soviet forces can be divided functionally into two major categories: occupation forces and counterinsurgency forces.<sup>30</sup> Though such a division is of necessity somewhat arbitrary, it provides a useful framework for examining the types of units the Soviets have deployed in Afghanistan and their operations.

### Occupation Forces

The units subsumed under occupation forces include all troops stationed in Afghanistan that seldom if ever engage in offensive counterinsurgency operations, as opposed to conventional assaults. These units make up the bulk of the Soviet forces, perhaps 75 percent or

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<sup>29</sup>The first figure is the estimate of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), London, in *The Military Balance 1986-1987*; the second is from Albert Stabel and Paul Bucherer, "Afghanistan 1985/1986: Besetzung und Kriegfuehrung der UdSSR," *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militaerzeitschrift*, No. 12, 1986. The yearly assessments by Stabel and Bucherer are among the best unclassified analyses of the war.

<sup>30</sup>For the purposes of this study, counterinsurgency forces are defined as those units and subunits that regularly engage in genuine antiguerrilla operations, often on what could be considered the mujahideens' own turf. As such, they are easily distinguished from the large-scale combined-arms operations in which conventional tactics and overwhelming firepower are brought to bear. As a rule, counterinsurgency operations are small, seldom conducted above battalion level, and highly mobile.

more. They can in turn be divided into regular combat and support units.

The regular combat units include all the motorized rifle divisions and the various independent units, with the important exception of the reconnaissance subunits.<sup>31</sup> The most frequent mission performed by these units is providing security for important military and civilian installations and transportation arteries. A substantial part of the military manpower of a given unit is needed for securing the unit itself. One of our respondents, an artilleryman in a motorized rifle regiment stationed near Ghazni, described the security arrangements of his base:

We had a defense perimeter of some 8 to 10 kilometers around our regiment and a mined field that was 500 to 600 meters wide. There were platoons positioned around the defense perimeter about a kilometer apart from each other. At least one battalion of the regiment was left behind for security whenever the rest of the troops were operating outside.

Regular units of various sizes also provide security for most airfields, logistic centers, and highways. In the early stages of the war, mechanized infantry units often accompanied the large supply convoys traveling to and from the Soviet Union, but they are now increasingly being replaced by better-trained *desantniki*. Infantry troops still provide road security details, but in a more static defensive mode, by manning small military outposts the Soviets have constructed at short intervals along most major roads. A tank gunner who was assigned to such a post described the mission and equipment of his unit:<sup>32</sup>

We were sent to Karabakh and our mission was to guard the road. The post was small and had 24 men with 24 AK-74s, three tanks, one mortar, one heavy machine gun, and large quantities of mines and ammo. There were also mines laid around the post. During the day, two of the tanks were assigned to guard the road, while the third stayed at the unit. At night we just stayed in our base and did guard duty.

There are, however, a number of combat operations in which regular troops quite often engage. Among these are the periodic Soviet forays into areas of suspected mujahideen activities—a kind of search-and-

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<sup>31</sup>It should be noted that none of the Soviet motorized rifle divisions in Afghanistan are presently at full order-of-battle strength. At the very least, the FROG surface-to-surface missile (SSM) battalions and SA-8 surface-to-air missile (SAM) regiments have been withdrawn.

<sup>32</sup>A similar unit was recently featured on a Soviet television program for the armed forces. In what appeared to be a platoon-size post, three tracked armored personnel carriers (BMPs), one tank, and a wheeled armored personnel carrier (BTR) could be seen behind rock-wall enclosures. (See *Sluzhu Sovetskogo Soyuza*, January 18, 1987.)

destroy operation called *prochiyoska* (combing operation). Such operations are normally conducted in inhabited areas. They begin with massive aerial bombardment, followed by a sustained artillery barrage. Only after the target area has been softened sufficiently do infantry personnel move in with tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs). Contact with resistance forces is seldom made during such operations, and the vast majority of the victims are Afghan village dwellers. Indeed, such operations are frequently designed primarily as punitive reprisals in response to mujahideen operations in an area. Several of the interviewees had participated in similar missions. The following are statements by three different respondents:

Once we were sent to a village and they were bombing it from planes and helicopters. We fired at it for two days and only then did the infantry move in.

Our operations against the *kishlaks* were all the same. First the helicopters will bomb them and then the artillery and the GRAD will fire. Only after that will the infantry attack them with tanks and BTRs.

One day we had this punitive operation. The point is that our regiment was being fired upon every day. So one day we were given an order to fire at a certain village and then to comb that village thoroughly, and if we find any people that were still alive to kill all of them. It is true, however, that there was not a single person left when our unit came in. They had all fled.

Regular units occasionally take part in two other types of combined arms operations: large-scale offensives and blocking operations, known in military jargon as *blokiroukas*, in which the unit attempts to encircle and destroy a large resistance force. The Soviets periodically conduct large-scale offensives with hundreds of tanks and combat vehicles and as many as 20,000 troops, to reestablish control over a mujahideen quasi-liberated area or to relieve an important garrison under siege. In the past two years, such offensives have been conducted in the Pansher and Kunar valleys and in Paktiya, Helmand, and Herat provinces, among others. The typical *modus operandi* of such a mission, in which Afghan regime forces also participate, is to push the force through from point A to point B on a given road under air cover. The infantry personnel seldom dismount their vehicles. After achieving its objective, the force returns to base, and the area is frequently reoccupied by the resistance. Contact with the enemy is usually at the time and place of the enemy's choice. The mujahideen generally avoid tackling large forces except when they can be ambushed at a propitious location.

These large offensives almost always include parallel operations by counterinsurgency forces along the flanks of the attacking force or diversionary heliborne attacks in the mujahideen rear.

Blocking operations normally involve encircling an area known to hold large resistance forces with regular units and subjecting it to intensive artillery and aerial bombardment prior to combing it through. Troops landed inside the encircled area who see actual combat are invariably from VDV and DShB units, rather than motorized rifle units. In these, as in all other operations, the Soviet command seems to have become especially sensitive to losses in the past two or three years. Several of our respondents were aware of efforts to keep casualties at a minimum, even at the cost of operational constraints. A former DShB sergeant recalled that two blocking operations in which he participated were called off because of excessive casualties, despite the fact that they were progressing well. In one case, the Soviets had surrounded a 500-man mujahideen force in the Paghman highlands, when a DShB unit inserted in the area ran into an ambush and lost about 50 of its men. The operation was called off immediately after the commanding officer learned about the losses, even though, according to our interviewee, it was only a question of time before the resistance group would be liquidated. Such historically atypical behavior would indicate that there are at least some political constraints, real or perceived, that affect the Soviet army's operational decisionmaking in Afghanistan at present.

The occupation forces also include a considerable number of logistic and support units—independent transportation units, water supply battalions, service and repair battalions, pipeline units, road repair units, medical battalions, and construction troops, among others.

Service in the transportation units, though a support activity, is among the most hazardous duty assignments in Afghanistan because of the frequent ambushes and extensive road mining by the resistance.<sup>33</sup> Supply convoys operate only during the day under heavy protection, and they usually cover less than 100 miles a day. Poor road conditions, difficult terrain, and security hazards combine to make road travel dangerous and slow. Both Soviet and defector sources indicate that it

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<sup>33</sup>The Afghanistan experience of the transportation service has evidently been subjected to intense scrutiny by military authorities, and ways to improve performance have been sought. A special meeting of the chiefs of transportation services from all military districts, groups of forces, and fleets is reported to have taken place recently in Moscow, at which special exercises by a transportation company and its security detail under attack by "diversionary groups" were demonstrated. (See Colonel V. Starov, "Shor rukovodyashchego sostava," *Tyl i snabzhenie*, No. 7, July 1986.)

often takes five to six days to cover the approximately 300 miles between Hairatan on the Soviet border and Kabul.<sup>34</sup>

Apart from the transportation units themselves, other support units, including independent repair battalions (*rembats*) and military highway security battalions (*otdelnyi dorozhno-komendantskii bataliion*), are tasked with facilitating the smooth functioning of the road logistic network. The *rembats* provide technical assistance and repair services both at their base facilities and through emergency repair trucks (called *tekhpomoch* or *letuchka*) that patrol the highways.<sup>35</sup> A typical emergency service truck, according to a former serviceman, has a crew of six (engineer, driver, mechanic, welder, battery specialist, and electrician).

Perhaps the most numerous of the support troops stationed in Afghanistan are the construction battalions (*stroibats*). As in the Soviet Union, *stroibat* units in Afghanistan engage exclusively in construction activities and never participate in combat. Although they receive rudimentary military training, most of them clearly lack the military skills to qualify as soldiers. In Afghanistan, *stroibat* personnel are used widely in the construction and improvement of military facilities, since the Soviets seldom use local labor. Two of the three *stroibat* soldiers in our interview sample had worked on barracks construction in Kabul, while the third manufactured concrete blocks for such projects, also in Kabul.

Finally, Soviet occupation forces include sizable numbers of military advisers seconded to the Afghan army and KGB personnel attached to the regime's security service, known as KHAD. There are further indications that some internal security troops (MVD) and KGB border guard detachments may also have been stationed in Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup>

### Counterinsurgency Forces

Three main types of counterinsurgency units are currently used by the Soviet command in Afghanistan: airborne, assault, and reconnais-

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<sup>34</sup>See Colonel V. Filatov, "Tsement," *Krasnaya zvezda*, March 3, 1984; and Captain O. Bedula, "Za povоротom Kabul," *Sovetskii voen*, No. 6, March 1983. The perilous nature of road travel in Afghanistan is further indicated by the newly acquired custom of Soviet military drivers of painting a star on the door of their trucks for each completed trip, like fighter pilots indicating their kills.

<sup>35</sup>Traditional Soviet practice requires a battalion-size maintenance and repair unit at the divisional level and a repair company at the regimental level. It is almost certain that the road conditions encountered in Afghanistan have led to reinforcement of these units and perhaps organizational experimentation.

<sup>36</sup>According to Stahel and Bucherer ("Afghanistan 1985/1986," op. cit., pp. 5-6), KGB troops provide security protection for the 40th Army command in Kabul and are also represented by at least two detachments in the northern half of the country. One regiment of MVD troops is said to be present in Kabul.

sance. These forces consist of 18,000 to 23,000 troops and constitute between 15 and 20 percent of the Soviet expeditionary force. These units bear the brunt of all combat.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, these are the units in which most of the Soviets' tactical adaptation, operational innovation, and experimentation have been exhibited. They have been the most successful Soviet units operationally, and they have undoubtedly contributed decisively to the improved performance of the Soviet forces overall in the past two or three years. At the same time, there is considerable confusion among Western observers and analysts over the roles and organization of these units, which are frequently lumped together under the fashionable but misleading term *spetsnaz*.<sup>38</sup>

Soviet airborne (VDV) forces were deployed in Afghanistan at the very beginning of the conflict, when elements of the 105th Guards division, normally stationed at Fergana, Turkestan Military District, were flown into Kabul to help secure the Soviet takeover. Since then, the 105th or parts of it have remained stationed in Afghanistan, where it has been joined by the 103rd Airborne from Vitebsk, Byelorussia. The total number of airborne troops in the Soviet contingent is probably over 10,000.<sup>39</sup> The normal operational mission of Soviet airborne forces is penetration of the enemy's strategic depth in support of front operations. Although VDV troops have sometimes been air-dropped in the mujahideen rear, these operations are apparently fairly rare.<sup>40</sup> Airborne troops are usually either heliborne, BMD-mounted, or on foot. This *modus operandi* makes it difficult to distinguish them from the DShB assault troops, especially since both types of forces are often referred to in the Soviet press as *desantniki* (landing troops).<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup>A telling, if indirect, indication is provided in an examination of the distribution of the highest Soviet award for valor, the Hero of the Soviet Union. We have identified 52 recipients of the award for service in Afghanistan, as of the end of 1987. Counterinsurgency units account for 75 percent of those who are specifically identified.

<sup>38</sup>For a typical example, see "Afghanistan Becomes War Laboratory for the Soviets," James Adams, defense correspondent of the *London Times*, published in the *Los Angeles Times*, January 4, 1987. The article claims that there are 60,000 Soviet *spetsnaz* troops in Afghanistan.

<sup>39</sup>A full-strength airborne division has 6,500 personnel; a regiment has 1,455. (See Captain Edwin W. Besch, "Soviet Airborne and Air Assault Forces," *Proceedings*, July 1986.)

<sup>40</sup>In some two dozen interviews with resistance commanders from throughout Afghanistan, the author was told of only three Soviet parachute landings.

<sup>41</sup>Troops identified as "guards" (*desantniki*) are usually VDV, since all airborne divisions, but only an occasional DShB unit, seem to bear the honorific "guards" distinction. The uniform of the DShB is indistinguishable from the VDV except that the former usually has a regular motorized rifle insignia. In contrast to motorized rifle troops, however, both VDV and DShB wear the distinct blue and white striped T-shirt (*telnynashka*) of the landing forces.



Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some apparently typical VDV counterinsurgency missions. Most of the operations described in Soviet military publications, where the troops are specifically identified as airborne or paratroopers (*vordushno-desantnye* or *parashutno-desantnye*), take place in the mountains and in formations no larger than a company.<sup>42</sup> At least some of the operations appear to call for unusual daring and require special skills. An interviewee who spent considerable time fighting on the mujahideen side after deserting described the following operation which he witnessed personally:

This happened on September 26, 1986, in Nangrahar province. We had taken positions close to the top of a mountain overlooking a valley and were shooting at the Soviets with BM-12s and mortars. Our *markaz* was not too far from our positions. Then all of a sudden a VDV company of about 90 men appeared and attacked us from behind. They had climbed straight up the mountain during the night. They captured the first post and came to within a hundred meters from where our storage was with all of our BM-12s and ammunition. They stopped, however, because they did not know that and because the mujahideen offered very strong resistance. We fought for two days there, and many people were killed. Before that I had thought that the Soviet soldiers are not worth anything, but I must say that I had never seen anything like that. We had good food there and I was in good shape, but I would not have been able to climb that mountain. It was simply impossible for me. These were really tough guys.

Other common VDV missions include various rescue operations, attacks on mujahideen strongholds, securing mountain passes, and setting up ambushes.<sup>43</sup> It would appear from Soviet descriptions that airborne troops have pioneered many of the guerrilla warfare techniques currently used by the Soviets. A recent dispatch, for example, favorably appraised the innovative approach of an airborne company experimenting with an attached mortar platoon in a mountainous environment.<sup>44</sup> There is also little doubt that the paratroopers are tasked with a substantial portion of the most difficult missions. Half of the identi-

<sup>42</sup>An article describing the physical training in a VDV regiment stationed in Afghanistan mentions in passing that "there isn't a single mission where it is not necessary to cross canyons and scale peaks." (A. Efimova, "Afghanistan: startii druzhby," *Sovetskii voen*, No. 9, 1986.)

<sup>43</sup>For examples, see A. Petrenko, "Iz rodnika duzhevnoi shchedrosti," *Komunist vooru-zhenyi* *siz*, No. 19, 1986; Boris Novakovski, "V pismakh mnogo ne raskazhesh," *Sobesednik*, No. 27, July 1986; A. Punko, "Orden ofitsera," *Krasnaya zvezda*, June 28, 1986; Liana Minasian, "Nepravda, drug ne umiraet," *Sobesednik*, No. 30, July 1986.

<sup>44</sup>Lieutenant Colonel I. Dynin, "Uveren, oruzhie ne podvediot," *Znamenets*, No. 3, 1983.

fied Heroes of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, apart from helicopter pilots, are VDV personnel.

The second important element in the Soviet counterinsurgency forces are the DShB, or air-assault brigades. Much less is known about these units and their role in Soviet military doctrine, particularly their combat missions in the Afghan theater.

Western analysts have tentatively identified two types of DShB units: air-assault brigades and air-mobile brigades.<sup>45</sup> The main difference between the two seems to be the presence of parachute battalions in the air-assault brigades, which are also said to be somewhat larger than the air-mobile brigades (2,000 vs. 1,700 personnel). From one to three of the eight air-assault brigades currently believed to be deployed in the Soviet armed forces are assumed stationed in Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup>

There is little unanimity, however, on the scope, characteristics, or types of DShB combat missions. Part of the problem lies in the great similarity between assault-forces operations and those of the VDV, and, for that matter, the reconnaissance troops. The DShB are also quite often mistaken for the much discussed GRU-subordinated *spetsnaz*. It is indeed difficult to provide a clear functional delineation between the assault forces and the other counterinsurgency units, since all of them seem to engage in similar operations and use common tactics at times. Nonetheless, the testimony of former soldiers and Soviet writings do provide some insights into DShB structure and practice.

Virtually all of our respondents were aware of the existence of DShB units, and many were familiar with them. The DShB soldiers were perceived by all as better-trained, elite types of troops, although clearly less so than the airborne. Those that had contact with DShB units either during their basic training or in their garrisons in Afghanistan made fairly similar assessments, as in the following examples:

There are special landing units in Afghanistan that are like infantry units but are designed for assault operations. Some were stationed in my unit (Bagram) and were called DShB. Those soldiers were usually excellent athletes and very strong physically.

<sup>45</sup>See Department of the Army, *The Soviet Army: Troops, Organization and Equipment*, FM 100-2-3, Washington, D.C., July 1984, pp. 4-131/4-132; Beach, "Soviet Airborne and Air Assault Forces," op. cit., p. 99; and David C. Isby, "The Vertical Threat: Air Assault and Air Mobile Brigades in the Soviet Army," *Amphibious Warfare Review*, August 1985.

<sup>46</sup>Beach, "Soviet Airborne and Air Assault Forces," op. cit., p. 99; Stakef and Bucherer, "Afghanistan 1985/1986," op. cit., p. 3.

A landing-assault brigade differs from a motorized rifle regiment in that it has more people who also have better training and more specialization. Their assignments are more serious and strict than for the regular units. Many of these fellows were good athletes and some even knew karate.

We had *desantniki* in our base that were like wild animals, that's how they had been trained. One of them came to our room one evening and wanted to take my hat. When I didn't give it to him, he beat me up. These *desantniki* are more like infantry; they are not airborne, although they perform similar missions.

Apart from receiving special training, the DShB are also seen by many as a select group in ethnic terms. The vast majority of them are said to be of Russian or other Slavic origin. Explained one former sergeant: "Most of the DShB soldiers were Slavs—Russians, Ukrainians, or Belorussians. I didn't see very many *natsmeny* there." Another respondent indicated that the selection process might be even more sophisticated:

Many of the personnel in the landing-assault unit were from Siberia and the Altai region. Why? Maybe because they used to live in the mountains. Maybe because they can stand cold better and are of greater endurance than the Europeans.

It is further evident from the interview data that the assault units are dispersed among a number of bases rather than concentrated at one or two main garrisons. The most common unit size is said to be the battalion. There are some indications that a DShB battalion is sometimes attached to a motorized rifle regiment to provide a counterinsurgency capability. One respondent claimed that a DShB brigade stationed at Samarkhel near Jelalabad, identified as the 66th Motorized Rifle Brigade, had three DShB battalions and three infantry (*pekhotu*) battalions, for a total of some 4,000 troops.

Assault troops carry out several types of operations on a regular basis, although other counterinsurgency units are probably involved in them as well. One such operation is protecting Soviet convoys from mujahideen ambushes. This mission requires scouting the route and engaging resistance groups ahead of the convoy, to secure free passage. It is usually conducted by heliborne assault troops, but dismounted operations have also been described. DShB elements also often accompany convoys in BMD, BTR, or BRDM (*boevaya razvedivatelno-dozornaya mashina*) vehicles. Many of the sapper units charged with mine deactivation also seem to be part of DShB units. Similar missions are sometimes performed by engineer reconnaissance patrols

(*inzhinerno-razvedovatelnyi dozor*), though it is not clear whether these are part of reconnaissance or DShB units in Afghanistan.<sup>47</sup>

The *desantniki* also conduct heliborne surprise attacks on villages or *chaikhana*s (tea houses) in what is considered resistance territory. The Soviets usually act on a tip of suspected mujahideen presence and are often able to achieve surprise. In one case, described by a prominent resistance commander, two Soviet helicopters landed some two dozen "commandos" near a remote *chaikhana*, killed 30 of the mujahideen having dinner inside, and left—all in less than 10 minutes. Similar cases, though seldom as successful, were related by many other commanders, indicating that such operations have become quite common. The DShB also appear to specialize in laying ambushes on resistance supply routes, especially at night. These have proven particularly effective and have created considerable difficulties for the guerrillas, who formerly enjoyed nearly complete freedom of movement at night. These ambushes and the extensive mining of infiltration routes have become, according to resistance leaders, among the most disruptive and damaging of Soviet counter guerrilla tactics.<sup>48</sup> DShB units are reported to be used also as a sort of reserve strike force in the operations of others. An account of a pipeline security detail operation, for instance, mentions that BTR-mounted *desantniki* were alerted and stood ready to intervene in case of need.<sup>49</sup>

Yet another innovative DShB tactic was described to us by a former soldier who served in these units for several months prior to his defection. A Hind gunship helicopter carrying six sharpshooters armed with Dragunov sniper rifles and powerful scopes hovered above a mujahideen caravan, while the snipers proceeded to shoot the mujahideen one by one.

DShB operations apparently are seldom conducted by units larger than company size, and emphasis is placed on mobility and surprise. There is some evidence from the Soviet literature that some of the best officers are selected as DShB commanders, indicative of the special status accorded these units. In one example, a major who had recently graduated from the Frunze Academy with distinction was described as

<sup>47</sup>This type of an operation is detailed in a story about a sergeant who upon accompanying a convoy for many hours was sent on an emergency heliborne operation, during which he was killed. (See A. Krivtsov, "Za ches do besmertiya," *Komsomolets Uzbekistana*, August 30, 1986.) Details on DShB convoy security operations are also provided in G. Gridina, "Obelak na Salange," *Sobesednik*, No. 36, September 1986.

<sup>48</sup>A fascinating description of a DShB night ambush, including details of deception maneuvers, tactics, and equipment used, has recently been provided by a correspondent for the weekly journal *Ogonyok* who accompanied the unit. (See Artem Borovik, "Vstrechimya u trekh zharavley," No. 30, July 1987.)

<sup>49</sup>"Vopeda s lyudmi," *Ty i snabzhenie*, No. 8, 1986.

the commander of a DShB-like battalion in the Pansher Valley engaged in caravan interdiction and convoy security "on a daily basis." Normally, any Frunze graduate, let alone a distinguished one, would be given a deputy regimental command slot at the very least.<sup>50</sup>

The last leg of the Soviet counterinsurgency triad consists of the reconnaissance troops (*razvedchiki*). There is a reconnaissance battalion (*razvedbataliion*) attached to each motorized rifle division and a reconnaissance company (*razvedrota*) to each regiment. The airborne divisions and the air-assault brigades are believed by Western analysts to have only company-size reconnaissance units.<sup>51</sup> The total number of reconnaissance troops in the Soviet expeditionary force is likely to be just under 5,000. The *razvedchiki* are a select group chosen for their physical prowess, intelligence, political reliability, and psychological stability. Subjected to rigorous and continuous training, they are truly the cream of the crop in their respective units.

As in the case of the VDV and the DShB, it is difficult to pinpoint with any degree of certainty operations carried out exclusively by the reconnaissance troops. It is possible that such tailor-made missions do not in fact exist. Still, a number of likely missions could be identified, for example, the setting up and manning of small fortified observation posts on mountain tops and astride key mujahideen infiltration and supply routes. Several such outposts, some of them at heights of up to 3,000 meters, have been described in the Soviet military media and shown on Soviet television. The personnel who man these posts remain there for months at a time and are said to endure great hardships, including inadequate supplies, extreme cold, and constant danger. What seems generally to distinguish the *razvedchiki* from the other counter guerrilla units is that the *razvedchiki* operate in much smaller groups and frequently in what is considered enemy territory. For instance, reconnaissance groups of half a dozen men are detailed to guard disabled helicopters or combat vehicles until rescue can be arranged, or they are tasked with diversionary operations in the rear of resistance forces about to be attacked. Small-scale, high-risk missions involving mountain-climbing have also been credited to reconnaissance troops.<sup>52</sup> Resistance sources further believe that the reconnaissance

<sup>50</sup>Colonel Yuri Belichenko, "Ushchelye," *Krasnaya zvezda*, November 8, 1986.

<sup>51</sup>Soviet publications, however, have discussed the operations of a VDV independent reconnaissance platoon as part of a subdivision unit. (See A. Punko, "Nagrada ofitsera," *Krasnaya zvezda*, July 12, 1986, and A. Kamanov, "Nepravda, drug ne umiraet," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, September 9, 1986.)

<sup>52</sup>See Major V. Yushashev, "Skhvatka na perevala," *Znamenosets*, September 1984; Captain S. Dychev, "Otsovski kharakter," *Znamenosets*, May 1983; A. Nikonenko, "Po zakonom družby," *Pravda vostoka*, August 9, 1986.

units are tasked with assassination missions against top mujahideen commanders.

All three types of counterinsurgency units appear to use specialized equipment and weapons in carrying out their operations. Silencers are used extensively both on the standard-issue AKS-74 submachine guns and on the 9mm Makarov pistol, as are subsonic rounds and spring-loaded knives that can fire a blade up to 5 meters. The new AKR-Krinkov submachine gun also made its first appearance among counterinsurgency forces. Portable flamethrowers (RPOs) and disposable grenade launchers (RPG-18s) are also employed, along with special acoustic mines and a variety of night-vision devices and scopes.

One final type of unit deserves to be included in the counterinsurgency category, even though it does not normally engage in combat operations. These are the psychological operations (agitation and propaganda) units (*agitatsionno-propagandistkii otryads*), called *agitotryads* for short. The *agitotryads* are said to have existed since the beginning of the war. They engage in psychological operations and propaganda among the civilian population and are not directly controlled by the regime. *Agitotryads* are furnished with audio, video, and photographic equipment and a variety of propaganda programs. A typical session is reported to include a movie and a photo exhibition about the life of Soviet Muslims, along with propaganda speeches. Such meetings often include the distribution of food and medical treatment to the villagers. The *agitotryads* are evidently staffed primarily with political officers and Soviet Central Asians, who are used as propagandists and interpreters. According to one Soviet source, assignment to an *agitotryad* requires "extensive operational experience and high moral/political qualities."<sup>43</sup>

A few words must also be said about the much-discussed *spetsnaz* forces and their role in Afghanistan. As already mentioned, the *spetsnaz* forces have acquired a nearly mythical reputation in uninformed Western accounts for both their alleged military prowess and their numbers in Afghanistan. They are often credited with most of the counterinsurgency operations and innovative Soviet tactics, although who they are and what they do is almost never convincingly demonstrated. Generally speaking, *spetsnaz* are reported to be highly specialized and well-trained troops designed to operate in enemy

<sup>43</sup>Alexandr Yuriev, "Reid vo imya pravdy," *Sobesednik*, No. 24, June 1986. Also see Major V. Davidov, "Zampolit Vyacheslav Berestyan," *Politicheskoe samooobrazovanie*, No. 7, 1986; Major A. Petrenko, "Is rodnika dukhovnoi shchedrosti," *Komunist vooruzhennykh sil*, No. 19, 1986; and Genadii Bocharov, "Vozvrashchenie," *Literaturnaya gazeta*, October 15, 1986.

territory in fairly small units. They are said to be tasked with performing high-risk, unorthodox missions such as assassinations, sabotage of key installations, and inciting riots. Such valuable assets are not likely to be used widely in Afghanistan, simply because of the absence of appropriately high-payoff targets there. While it is possible and even likely that there are some *spetsnaz* units attached to the 40th Army, it is highly unlikely that they are present in very large numbers, perhaps with the exception of training missions. It is possible that some *spetsnaz* may be involved in assassination and sabotage missions in Pakistan, but even that is questionable, given the availability of KHAD personnel.<sup>34</sup>

Having noted the substantial improvement of Soviet counterinsurgency performance in the past two or three years, as a result of the rigorous and more imaginative use of special counterinsurgency units, an important caveat is in order. Much of the observed improvement has occurred in a regimen of virtually complete Soviet dominance in the air. This dominance is of critical importance to effective counterinsurgency operations, since a significant majority of such missions depend on reliable air transportation and combat support. Thus, any decrease in Soviet domination in the air is certain to result in a significant degradation of counterinsurgency operations as well. There is mounting evidence that such a trend has indeed begun following the introduction of current-generation shoulder-fired antiair missiles in the mujahideen arsenal in late 1986. According to both mujahideen and Western sources (and, indirectly, Soviet sources as well), the introduction of U.S.-made Stinger and British-made Blowpipe missiles has exacted a heavy toll and has considerably disrupted Soviet air operations. The Stingers have been particularly effective, having a reported kill ratio of between 30 and 40 percent. A conservative estimate credits the new missiles with destroying 270 Soviet aircraft between October 1986 and September 1987.<sup>35</sup> Although it is perhaps too early

<sup>34</sup>The only evidence we have of *spetsnaz*-like activities in our interview data is secondhand knowledge of troops "dressed like Afghans and operating at night." Overall, we are convinced that the *spetsnaz* contribution to the Soviet war effort in Afghanistan is not a major one at present.

<sup>35</sup>See Aaron Karp, "Blowpipes and Stingers in Afghanistan: One Year Later," *Armed Forces Journal International*, September 1987. The dramatic improvement of mujahideen antiair capabilities is increasingly admitted by Soviet correspondents covering the war. A remarkably somber account of the dangers of flying in Afghanistan based on the diary of an MI-8 helicopter pilot reports that four of the pilot's colleagues were shot down between November 1 and November 15, 1986. The article also contains a direct admission of the change in Soviet air operations forced by the Stingers: "I remember that last year the helicopters flew at maximal altitudes, but now with the appearance of the Stingers, they came down from 6,000 meters (the approximate ceiling for the MI-8) and are flying 5 meters above the ground at 250 kilometers per hour." (See Artem Borovik, "Vstreimaya u trekh zhuravley," *Ogonyok*, No. 29, July 1987.)

to gauge the exact impact of the growing resistance challenge to Soviet air domination, it is clear that Soviet counterinsurgency operations have been constrained to a considerable degree. Should the Soviets be unable to develop effective countermeasures while deliveries to the resistance continue, Soviet counterinsurgency efforts could suffer a significant reversal.



### III. FACTORS AFFECTING MORALE AND DISCIPLINE

#### PERSONNEL RELATIONS

In the Soviet army, as in any other army, personnel relations exert a major influence on unit cohesion and, ultimately, military performance. Until very recently, however, the Soviet military media have been reluctant to discuss personnel relations openly, beyond the conventional platitudes about socialist comradeship-in-arms. In this area, our interview data have been particularly useful and have provided us with a wealth of interesting and often surprising insights.

#### Newcomers Vs. Old-Timers

Easily the most important and consequential personnel factor affecting morale and discipline is the pervasive conflict between first- and second-year soldiers in the Soviet expeditionary force. This conflict, known as *dedoushchina* or *starikoushchina*, is, of course, of long standing in the Soviet army; it predates not only the Afghan war, but the Soviet Union itself, since its historic roots go back to Czarist times. Nonetheless, it seems to have become greatly exacerbated under the conditions of the war, and it poses a considerable challenge to the maintenance of morale and discipline.

The problem stems from an unwritten army law that second-year soldiers, or *stariki* (old men, old-timers), regardless of rank, enjoy complete hegemony over the younger conscripts (*molodiye*). While the most important division is that between *stariki* and *molodiye*, the pecking order resembles an elaborate caste system, with those who have served less than six months at the very bottom and those about to be discharged the uncontested bosses.<sup>1</sup>

The superior status of the *stariki* is expressed in a number of practices, none of which are officially sanctioned, but all of which are evidently tolerated and very much a fact of army life. Perhaps the most innocuous, albeit demeaning, of these is the young soldiers' obligation

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<sup>1</sup>Soldiers who have served less than six months are known as *duky* (ghosts), *salogy* (little fish), or *chishiki* (little birds). The *stariki* that have served more than a year, but less than 18 months are called *chirpaki* (ladies), while those that have less than three months of service remaining are known as *dedushki* (grandfathers). At the very top are the *dembei* (demobilized ones), or *grazhdanin* (citizens), soldiers who have already received their discharge orders but have not yet been allowed to leave.

to perform personal chores for the old-timers, such as cleaning their uniforms, shining their boots, and doing their laundry. The *molodiye* also invariably do all the dirty and menial jobs as well. Here are some typical examples reported by our respondents:

The *stariki* always forced us to do everything for them. We had to make their beds, clean their shoes, wash their laundry, and do it without the slightest protest.

Well, the *molodiye* had to do all the work you could imagine in an army. We had to do dishes, clean up the territory, clean the latrines, and then do the *stariki*'s personal laundry and anything else they wanted.

When I was already an old-timer and was on duty in the platoon quarters I was responsible for order and cleaning. I would tell my soldiers who had already been there for a year or more to clean the territory, but of course, they wouldn't do it themselves because they were *stariki* too and would force the young ones to do it. I didn't care much as long as it was done.

Other aspects of the *stariki-molodiye* relationship are much less benign. Second-year soldiers can and often do force the *molodiye* to give them their belongings—clothes, personal items, and money. Several soldiers in our sample had had many of their belongings and money uncereemoniously requisitioned from them. A former sergeant describes what happened to him upon arrival in his permanent unit in Afghanistan:

When we arrived the *stariki* tried to take everything from us—things such as cigarettes, lighters, pens, etc. The very first day they took our new overcoats away from us and also our gloves and our new pants that had just been issued to us.

Some of the hazing administered to the *molodiye* is seemingly designed to humiliate them and occasionally borders on the sadistic. We were told of instances where young soldiers were forced to scrub latrines with toothbrushes, crawl under beds, and run with gas masks on until they fainted. Others were awakened in the middle of the night and ordered to provide food and cigarettes. One former soldier recalled a popular *stariki* pastime in his unit:

They would line us up before going to bed and make us crawl under the beds. You would crawl under the bed on your belly and the *starik* would sit on the bed with his legs hanging down so you couldn't get through without touching them. He would say some-

thing like, "Hey, you have to honk like a car." So you would have to do that and he would raise his legs and you would get through.

Refusal to comply with the demands of the *stariki* invariably results in severe beatings. These are usually administered by a group of old-timers, and they are frequently brutal. Several of the respondents knew of cases where young soldiers had been beaten so severely that they had to be taken to the hospital. One soldier had his bladder ruptured, while another suffered several broken ribs. Physical punishment is sometimes used simply as a rank-enforcing method. A former soldier recalled that immediately upon arriving in Afghanistan, the *molodiye* were "processed" by the old men. This involved passing the young conscripts one by one through a circle of *stariki*, who would hit, kick, and humiliate them, "so that they would understand who is boss." At other times, the youngsters are beaten in what seems a totally arbitrary fashion. One of our interviewees was severely beaten for refusing an old soldier's offering of hashish. Despite such brutality, the young soldiers do not appear to have much, if any, official recourse. Complaining to a commander is said to only make matters worse, since the officers, as a rule, refuse to get involved.

In the absence of any officially established channels to settle grievances and seek redress, this inexplicably cruel conflict leads to violence, morale problems, and serious discipline infractions. A number of cases of suicide were described to us by respondents. A young Uzbek recounted the case of a fellow Uzbek from his unit:

I knew a young Uzbek who killed himself. He came to Afghanistan and soon ran away. The whole regiment looked for him for two days but couldn't find him. Finally they found him in his native town. He was sent to the *diabat* for 20 days, and then they brought him back to the unit. After that, he was beaten severely every night by the *stariki*. His money was taken from him and they beat him even with a metal bar. He wrote a letter to his father telling him that he would rather die than serve any longer and begging him to come and take him home. Then one night at 2 a.m. he took a knife, went to the toilet, locked the door, and committed suicide.

Fragging is also not uncommon both in garrison and during combat. Respondents claimed to know of several instances in which young soldiers shot *stariki* in the back during operations. Three specific incidents that took place in the respondents' own units were described to us in detail. In the first one, a soldier who was regularly abused went berserk and shot two of his tormentors point blank. The second case was quite similar and involved a friend of one of the interviewees:

This happened at one of the Soviet roadblocks on the Kabul-Jelalabad road. There were three *stariki* and a young soldier serving in a tank. I knew the young soldier very well; his name was Aleksey. When he would come to the base, he used to tell me that the *stariki* were abusing him viciously, beating him constantly and making him do the hardest work. If he couldn't accomplish it, the three *dedushki* would beat him twice as hard. He told me that they forced him to stand guard every night until dawn; he seldom slept more than two or three hours. They even tried to molest him sexually. His face was always marked by beatings. What could I advise him? I just told him, "Hang in there Alyosha, hang in there." Well, in the end, he couldn't take it anymore, and one night while the *dedushki* were sleeping sweetly he emptied an entire magazine into them and killed all three of them. He got eight years for that.

The third case was witnessed by a respondent:

One evening a young soldier in our unit went to a tent where old-timers were sleeping and threw in two hand grenades. The *stariki* managed to throw out one of them, but the second one exploded and several of them were injured, although somehow nobody was killed.

Perhaps even more serious from the military authorities' point of view is the fact that abuse by the old-timers often seems to be the main motivation for desertion by young soldiers. Even our small sample provides ample evidence of the destructive impact of this conflict on the loyalty and motivation of first-year conscripts. Close to half of our respondents who were bona fide defectors (i.e., not soldiers who were captured while being AWOL) gave their inability to endure abuse by the *stariki* as the primary—and often the sole—reason for their desertion.

The conflict among the ranks also has a detrimental effect on the command authority of junior commanders, since the seniority system is enforced without regard for rank. Thus young soldiers who become sergeants after six months are still completely at the mercy of second-year privates who are technically their subordinates. To the extent that the vast majority of Soviet noncommissioned ranks are filled by term soldiers, this is likely to be a serious problem for small unit cohesion and performance.

It should be emphasized, however, that such personnel conflicts affect the occupation forces to a much greater degree than the counter-insurgency units. Though the principles of seniority according to year of service are clearly observed, it is difficult to believe that such serious conflicts could persist among soldiers who spend much of their time in combat.

The Soviet attitude toward *dedoushchina* has, for many years, been to tolerate and therefore implicitly encourage this quasi-caste system in

the armed forces. While the rationale behind such a policy is not exactly clear, it could be speculated that the division of the enlisted personnel into two strongly antagonistic groups facilitates officer control and diminishes the chances of a common rank-and-file front against the authorities. Whatever the case, Soviet authorities have evidently been satisfied with the way the system has been working, and discussion of this pervasive problem has been deliberately avoided.<sup>2</sup> Recently, however, military authorities, undoubtedly chastened by the experience in Afghanistan, appear to have been reassessing the situation. One sign is the appearance of a considerable number of articles that discuss the conflict in an open and alarmed way. The noncommissioned officers' journal *Znamenets* gave considerable prominence to an investigative report detailing serious discipline problems caused by *stariki-molodiye* conflicts in a sapper unit.<sup>3</sup> More significantly, a subsequent issue of the journal reported that an investigation conducted in the unit following the appearance of the article has led to the punishment of two second-year soldiers, party reprimands for a number of officers, and dismissal from the service of the unit's *Komsomol* secretary, who was a senior lieutenant.<sup>4</sup>

A further indication of growing concern has been the numerous statements by military justice officials that officers tolerating "non-regulation" personnel relations will be severely punished. Despite this new official activism, however, as of late 1987, little appeared to have changed, and *starikovshchina* continues to be the rule rather than the exception.<sup>5</sup>

Relations between the enlisted men and the officers are also characterized by a degree of conflict, though to a lesser extent. These conflicts are mostly service-related and are less often of a personal nature. We were told of a number of clashes between officers (who are often referred to as "dogs" or "jackals") and the ranks resulting from excessive service demands, poor food, or health problems. For the most part, the officers appear to be willing to make concessions to the

<sup>2</sup>Soviet writer Yuri Polyakov wrote recently that one of his works dealing with *starikovshchina* had been rejected many times by military officials (see *Ogonyok*, No. 44, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>V. Kashirin and V. Litovkin, "Vliyanie splochnosti voinskovo kolektiva na ukreplenie distsipliny," *Znamenets*, No. 10, 1985. For other articles on the subject, see Major-General V. Makarov, "Splochenie mnogonatsionalnovo voinskovo kolektiva," *Voennyi vesnik*, No. 9, 1985; Major O. Bedula, "Ya prikroyu," *Krasnaya zvezda*, January 6, 1986; "Serzhsant pobornik distsipliny: 'Stariki' i 'Starikovshchina'," *Znamenets*, No. 10, 1986; and "Perestroika i ustav," *Krasnaya zvezda*, February 28, 1987.

<sup>4</sup>"Kolektiv i distsiplina," *Znamenets*, No. 1, 1986.

<sup>5</sup>See, for instance, an interview with the chief military procurator, Lieutenant General B. S. Popov, in *Krasnaya zvezda*, August 18, 1987.

soldiers and to try to resolve conflicts before they attract the attention of higher authority, since this has a deleterious impact on their career prospects. Nonetheless, officers do treat soldiers quite roughly, and beatings occur fairly often. Several of our respondents had been hit or kicked by officers for various transgressions. The one officer in our interview sample confirmed that physical punishment is often resorted to by commanders:

Well, it is true that the officers beat the soldiers. Sometimes they beat them dreadfully. I saw it myself, though I didn't do it personally. I understand that the soldier hasn't done anything bad to me. He is not my enemy. I often tried to stop other officers, literally holding their hands. I'll tell them, "Why are you doing this . . . he has a mother and a father, why do you beat him?" But I have never done it myself. Well, in rare cases, I did slap a soldier.

At times, soldiers are physically punished if they fail to carry out orders that have little to do with the service. Such was the following case:

I was beaten a number of times. Once a senior warrant officer was making some moonshine and he ordered me to find him some sugar. But where could I get it? I went around with a bucket and if I had seen some I would have, of course, stolen it. But there was nothing around. So when I went back empty-handed, he just started beating me.

Conversely, instances of individual officers being beaten and even murdered by soldiers were also reported. One of the interviewees was an eyewitness to such an incident:

When I first got to the unit in Jلالabad, the commander of our platoon . . . would yell and curse people out all the time. He would also hit people and even knocked a *starik's* teeth out. So one day when we were out in the mountains on operations, two of the *stariki* just pushed him over a cliff. They said that he had slipped, and even though most of the platoon saw them, nobody reported them. Everybody hated his guts and was happy to get rid of him.

As in the case of the conscripts, relations seem to be much better in combat units than in the occupation forces. Several respondents expressed warm feelings for their combat commanders, with whom some had been on a first-name basis. Attitudes were generally more negative toward the political officers, who were often perceived as lazy and irrelevant. The most hated—and, at the same time, feared—among the officers were the KGB "special section" representatives.

Overall, relations between officers and the ranks are tense but do not appear to be as intractable as those within the ranks.

## The Ethnic Factor

The second-strongest negative influence on Soviet army morale and discipline is the ethnic factor. Problematic interethnic relations are, of course, not unique to the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. They have been a fixture of the Soviet military establishment for a long time. Yet, as in the case of the conflict between youngsters and old-timers, the war in Afghanistan seems to have exacerbated the problem. There are a number of objective reasons for this, stemming primarily from the nature of the war. In Afghanistan, the Soviets are conducting a war against a people that have considerable religious, cultural, and ethnic affinity with the largest and most important non-Slavic ethnic element in the Soviet army—the Soviet Muslims. In fact, three of the key Afghan ethnic groups (Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen) have about 18 million co-nationals in the Soviet Union.

At the same time, the massive demographic shift that the Soviet population has been undergoing for the past 30 years or so has brought about a dramatic increase in the share of non-Slavs and Muslims in the draft-age cohort. And this shift has been accompanied by an Islamic cultural and religious resurgence that has stubbornly resisted official efforts to socialize young Muslims in the Soviet value system.

One of the surprising results of this trend is the growing inability, or perhaps reluctance, on the part of young Muslims to learn Russian. After years of denying the existence of language deficiencies in the armed forces, Soviet authorities have recently started publishing figures indicating a problem of serious proportions. According to a recent article, 90 percent of the rural draftees (a sizable majority of all draftees) in Central Asian republics "practically do not speak Russian," and even in the cities, "many youth know it very poorly."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the trends point to a further deterioration of the situation. The article cited above, written in late 1987, acknowledges that "this negative process has not stopped but is progressing. In the current year the number of draftees that do not know Russian increased by 5 percent in comparison with last year."<sup>7</sup> Generally speaking, Muslim recruits today seem to be less predisposed, attitudinally, linguistically, and even physically, for service in the armed forces than before.<sup>8</sup> The violent anti-

<sup>6</sup>B. Kulikov, "Uchit rodinu zashchibchat," *Sovetskii patriot*, November 15, 1987.

<sup>7</sup>This trend is confirmed also by Academician Yu. Bromley, one of the top Soviet demographers. According to Bromley, "In certain republics, the youth today know Russian less well than the middle-aged population." (Yu. Bromley, "Sovershenstvovanie natsionalnikh otnoshenii v USSR," *Komunist*, No. 8, 1986.)

<sup>8</sup>Draftees, especially from the republics of Central Asia and the Transcaucasus, noted the military journal *Komunist vooruzhenykh sil*, "speak Russian poorly, many have never worked, have insufficient physical development and there are even believers among

Russian riots by thousands of young Kazakhs in Alma Ata in December 1986 are an eloquent testimony that political resentment toward the Russian-dominated system by young Muslims may also have become a factor.<sup>9</sup> Yet these ill-prepared and rather unenthusiastic Muslim draftees now constitute close to 30 percent of the available pool of 18-year-olds, and it is no longer possible to use them primarily in noncombat and support activities, as was often done in the past.<sup>10</sup>

Present Soviet policies regarding the use of Muslim recruits in Afghanistan are influenced, on the one hand, by the experience of the initial invasion force and, on the other, by the imperative to incorporate sizable numbers of Muslims in the Afghan contingent. As discussed in Section II, the Muslims, who were dramatically overrepresented in the invasion troops, did not acquit themselves with great distinction. Many of them fraternized with the locals, many were reluctant to fight, and some occasionally showed open disloyalty.<sup>11</sup> As a result, most of the originally mobilized Muslims were withdrawn within a couple of months after the invasion.

Since then, staffing policies have resulted in the virtual absence of Muslims from the counterinsurgency forces, underrepresentation in the regular motorized rifle units, and overrepresentation in the noncombat and support formations.<sup>12</sup>

These policies have alleviated but not eliminated the ethnic problems that undermine morale in the army. One of the most intractable is the pervasive ethnic prejudice that appears to be even more

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them." (See "Dokhodi do kazhdogo cheloveka," *Komunist vooruzhenykh sil*, No. 22, 1984.)

<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of growing Muslim assertiveness, see S. Eaders Wimbush, "The Muslim Ferment in Soviet Central Asia," *Global Affairs*, Summer 1987; and Alex Alexiev, *Gorbachev's Muslim Dilemma*, The RAND Corporation, P-7300, January 1987. For an insightful discussion of the Soviet military's failure to socially integrate the Muslims, see Sergei Zamiatinov, "The Role of the Military in the Social Integration of Ethnic Muslims in the USSR," *Radio Liberty Research*, RL 477/83, December 1983.

<sup>10</sup>For a detailed examination of Soviet staffing policies vis-à-vis the Muslims, see Alexiev and Wimbush (eds.), *Ethnic Minorities in the Red Army*, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup>One of our respondents who participated in the invasion confirmed that the Muslims in his unit began immediately to trade with the Afghans and were rarely used by the commanders for combat duty, even though they made up 75 percent of the unit. Several desertions occurred in the month in which he was in Afghanistan prior to his own desertion. Soviet sources have begun to provide tangential information on this sensitive subject as well. A recently published diary of an officer who took part in the invasion notes that after crossing the border, "Our Tajik and Uzbek soldiers promptly found a common language with the Afghans." (Lieutenant Colonel L. Marurin and Major N. Moskatyov, "Na linii opaya," *Komunist vooruzhenykh sil*, No. 23, 1986; also Taras Kuzio, "Ethnic Problems in the Soviet Army," *Soviet Analyst*, Vol. 14, No. 24.)

<sup>12</sup>According to former soldiers from the construction troops, the share of Muslims in strobait units was about 50 percent or more. A repair company in which a respondent served had close to 40 percent from Central Asia.



pronounced in Afghanistan. With respect to the Central Asians and other Muslims, such prejudice borders on racism. They are, for instance, regularly called *chernozhopy* (black asses) or *churkas* (a pejorative term denoting stupidity) and are given the most menial and demeaning assignments.<sup>13</sup>

The Muslim soldiers are also subjected to more physical abuse by the *steriki* than anybody else. All of our eight Muslim respondents had been mistreated to some extent. Four of them defected because of repeated and severe beatings. Yet whenever Muslim soldiers form the majority of a unit, they are perfectly capable of victimizing the Russians and other Europeans. One of our interviewees who served in a military bakery had considerable experience of this sort:

At the baking plant where I served before defecting, the soldiers were mostly *churkas*—Turkmen, Uzbek, Tajik, and a few Azerbaijanis. There were about twenty of them and only five of us Russians. I think all of those *churkas* really hate Russians, especially the young ones. We Russians lived all together in a tent and tried to keep to ourselves, but they would find any reason to beat you. Once I refused to do something for them and the Tajiks and the Turkmen beat me so badly that I couldn't get up the next morning and stayed in bed all day. They also told me to tell the officer that I was ill and I did because I was afraid of them.

The Muslim nationalities are generally reported to have a much stronger sense of national solidarity than most others and form closely knit ethnic support groups. These ethnic cliques often engage in brawls with Russians and others. Under some circumstances, such brawls could assume the character of ethnic mutinies. One case that has been documented took place in October 1985 at the Soviet base at Daht-e-Abdan in northern Afghanistan. The execution of a Tajik soldier there, allegedly for selling arms to the mujahideen, led to a mutiny by his fellow countrymen that eventually resulted in the blowing up of the ammunition dump, causing numerous casualties.<sup>14</sup>

However, there is also a more positive side to the Soviet experience with the Muslims in Afghanistan. Hundreds of Farsi-speaking Tajiks perform valuable work as military interpreters and in the civilian

<sup>13</sup>A recent *Krasnaya zvezda* article tells how a company commander sent a Central Asian private to work for two months in the private household of a civilian as a sort of a domestic help and gardener. His attitude toward the soldier is revealed in the following instructions he is said to have given him: "There is a Zhiguly at the gate. Sit inside, go where they take you and do as they tell you." (Colonel G. Ivanov, "Na 'otkhozhii promisel,'" *Krasnaya zvezda*, November 20, 1986.) Ethnic antagonisms in the Soviet army are also discussed in Lieutenant V. Kovalev, "Zemlyaki," *Krasnaya zvezda*, February 7, 1986.

<sup>14</sup>See Arabic, March 1986, p. 48; and *Les Nouvelles d'Afghanistan*, March-April 1986, p. 9.

administration of the country. Soviet control of the Afghan army, for example, would be much more difficult without Central Asian interpreters serving with Soviet advisers down to the battalion level. The same would be true about the Soviet psychological operations detachments in the Afghan countryside that depend on the linguistic skills of the Soviet Central Asians and their knowledge of local customs.

Despite such exceptions, the war in Afghanistan has shown that ethnic cleavages in the Soviet armed forces continue to be deep. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that, under the conditions of war against a determined Muslim adversary, those cleavages have become magnified. In Afghanistan, Soviet Muslim soldiers have proven to be a dubious asset.

## QUALITY OF LIFE

There are a number of factors related to the specific conditions under which Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan live and fight that bear directly on their morale and military performance. These factors range from everyday concerns, such as food and lodging, to health and emotional/psychological problems. Perhaps the most serious of these in terms of their impact on performance are health problems.

### Health Problems

As in many other areas, the health problems besetting Soviet servicemen in Afghanistan are a reflection of long-standing systemic inadequacies of Soviet military health care, exacerbated by conditions encountered in the field. Inadequacies that have been openly discussed by the military press include shortages of qualified medical personnel, lack of preventive health care, poorly equipped medical facilities, and serious disregard for hygiene. According to the Commander of the Rear Services, Marshal Kurkotkin, up to 25 percent of the units in some military districts have neither laundry nor bathing facilities.<sup>15</sup>

Such shortcomings are said to have a significant negative impact on the health of the Soviet soldier. In one test, 20 percent of the servicemen in a regimental-size unit were found to suffer from mucous infections of the skin. Dysentery is reported to afflict about half of all draftees during their term of service.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>*Voenno-meditsinskii Zhurnal*, No. 1, 1986.

<sup>16</sup>See Natalie Gross, "How Healthy Is the Soviet Soldier?" *Soviet Analyst*, Vol. 15, No. 8, April 16, 1986, p. 4; and *Voenno-meditsinskii Zhurnal*, No. 5, 1984.

The state of military health care has caused sufficient concern among top officials that they have spoken publicly about the need for radical change. In the words of the Chief of the Military Medical Directorate, Colonel General Komarov:

We are no longer talking about further improvements in our work but about a radical reform in the activities of military medical personnel.

It is against this background that the pervasive health problems in Afghanistan become understandable. From the very beginning of the Afghan campaign, the Soviets were faced with a number of health-threatening conditions they were ill-prepared to handle. These included systemic problems such as poorly trained medical personnel and inadequate medical facilities, as well as conflict-specific problems such as serious shortages of water and difficulties in adapting to the extreme climatic conditions in the country. The magnitude of these problems—some of them encountered at the beginning of the conflict and still present in many cases—indicates a surprisingly poor mobilizational capability on the part of the military medical service for the type of conflict faced in Afghanistan.

Recent articles and discussions in the Soviet media have shed considerable light on the subject. A recent television program for the military revealed that the military medical service was unprepared to deal with many of the infectious and epidemic diseases encountered in Afghanistan and implied that more Soviet soldiers have succumbed to disease than have been killed in combat.<sup>17</sup> The program further revealed that many military surgeons were sent to Afghanistan directly from medical school or with only one year of experience, a testimony to the rather indifferent priority assigned to Afghanistan.

Further confirmation of this surprising lack of concern for the care of the troops in Afghanistan is provided in a recent dispatch about the Soviet military hospital in Kabul, which is the largest Soviet medical facility in Afghanistan and the only one equipped to provide complete emergency care. As late as August 1987, the hospital was reported to be operating with only half of the required nursing staff and less than

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<sup>17</sup>An indication of the extent of the Soviets' initial inability to deal with some of these conditions was provided indirectly by an interviewed medical official who asserted that the mortality of some unspecified diseases had been cut down "ten and even fiftyfold in some cases." (See "Sluzhu sovetakomu soyuzu," Moscow Television, Second Program, January 3, 1988.)

a third of the laboratory technicians needed. Nurses were working around the clock and even performing laboratory work.<sup>18</sup>

A shortage of water, coupled with the traditional cavalier attitude toward personal hygiene in the Soviet army, has created a dismal health situation in many units. Our interviewees report that most of the units had no running water, and hot water was available only infrequently. In some posts in northern Afghanistan, water had to be trucked in from the Soviet Union.

The impact of such conditions on personal hygiene is devastating. According to our respondents, soldiers often went up to a month without a shower, changed their underwear once every two to three weeks, and often ate from aluminum plates that had been scrubbed, but not washed. Predictably, infectious disease, intestinal parasites, skin infections, and lice were said to be extremely common, indeed of near epidemic proportions. The following examples are typical of the former servicemen's assessments:

Living conditions were terrible. Underwear was not issued, the bed sheets were never changed, and the soldiers rarely took a bath. And even if there was a possibility to bathe, you had to wash with water that was barely warm or cold.

In Afghanistan, the hygienic conditions were terrible. People lived in tents, sand was everywhere, there was little water, and it was very bad. The most widespread disease was hepatitis, and we also had dysentery and stomach problems.

The prevalent diseases were yellow jaundice and dysentery due to the drinking water which wasn't boiled and was poorly chlorinated. People would get sick also because of eating from unwashed dishes. It was a real epidemic out there. When you had yellow jaundice earlier they would discharge you from the service, but not any more. You spend some time in the hospital and they send you back to your unit.

All the hospitals were packed in Afghanistan. One time, 20 percent of my unit were in the hospital with hepatitis. Also there were many cases of dysentery, malaria, and typhus, and everybody had boils and skin infections. Those who were very sick would be sent to the hospital in Termez or in Tashkent.

Medical care in our regiment was very poor. They put up a *sanchast* in a tent in our unit, but they hardly did anything for you there. There was not enough medicine. They would keep you two days, give you some kind of pills and let you go, and that was it. Jaundice was

<sup>18</sup>See Yevgeniya Agranovskaya, "Sestra," *Smena*, No. 15, August 1987.

a real epidemic in our unit; you know how your eyes and skin turn yellow and you feel nauseous all the time. About a third of the soldiers got it while I was there.

The acuteness of the health problems experienced by the troops in Afghanistan is increasingly, if indirectly, acknowledged by Soviet authorities. A Soviet study published in 1983 notes that between 1976 and 1982, the incidence of infectious hepatitis in the army increased sevenfold in comparison with previous years.<sup>19</sup> It is virtually certain that the Afghanistan war accounts for most of this spectacular increase. More recently, the deputy chief of the medical administration at the Ministry of Defense singled out "acute intestinal infections and infectious hepatitis," as well as skin disease, as the most urgent health problems in the Soviet armed forces at present. As a way of combatting these afflictions, he encouraged military physicians to exercise "sanitary supervision of food and water supplies" and observe "basic sanitary-hygienic norms" in the "thorough cleaning of facilities" and "washing of dishes," implying that these elementary procedures were not being followed at the time.<sup>20</sup>

There are also a number of climate-related health problems. Especially prevalent are reported to be heat strokes and dehydration among the enlisted men, particularly those operating combat vehicles in the summer. Frostbite during the harsh Afghan winter among troops operating in the mountainous areas is also common. One former sergeant recalled that cases of acute heat prostration in his regiment were so numerous during operations that the medical unit was overwhelmed and unable to deal with all of them. According to him, nine soldiers died of heat stroke during his four months in the regiment. Combat injuries also present a serious challenge because of evacuation difficulties and because the serious cases evidently could be treated only at the central 40th Army hospital at Kabul, or in hospitals of the Turkestan Military District.<sup>21</sup> Still, combat-related health problems pale in comparison with those stemming from the glaring deficiencies of the infrastructure described above. Many of our respondents believed, with some reason, as indicated above, that disease was a more serious threat than mujahideen bullets.

<sup>19</sup> *Vostochno-meditsinskii Zhurnal*, No. 10, 1983.

<sup>20</sup> Lieutenant General I. Sinopalnikov, "Glavnoe vnimanie: voiskovomu zvenu," *Tyl i snabzhenie*, No. 7, 1986. Also see Peter Kruzhin, "Health Problems in the Soviet Army and Navy," *Radio Liberty Research*, RL 146/86, April 3, 1986.

<sup>21</sup> Some of the shortcomings of medical facilities and problems encountered during the evacuation of wounded personnel in mountainous terrain are discussed in Colonel R. Madzhanov, "V gorakh po frontovomu," *Znamenetsy*, No. 10, 1986.

## Food and Quarters

Considerable information was provided by our interviewees on other aspects of the daily life and living conditions of Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan. Living quarters were said to be inferior to those in the Soviet Union by a large margin. In the early period of the war, most enlisted personnel were crammed in groups of 30 to 40 into large tents that afforded no privacy and little protection from the extreme climatic fluctuations and sandstorms. Troops stationed in Kabul and Jلالabad usually enjoyed much better housing. Wooden and concrete structures have progressively replaced the tent camps, but many still remain.

Respondents were split in their assessment of food quality. This would indicate that there are differences among the various units. Many respondents believed that rations provided to the counterinsurgency forces, especially the airborne, were superior to their own. One former serviceman had observed VDV troops in the unit next door roast a whole lamb—something he believed would have been out of question in his unit. The general consensus was that rations were often adequate in quantity but of indifferent quality. As in all other areas of army life, the young soldiers were much worse off than the old-timers, since the latter had their pick of all the better food. Virtually all of the food was canned, and no fresh produce or fruit was available, except on very rare occasions. Respondents voiced the following opinions:

Well, we mostly ate canned meat and vegetables, mashed potatoes, and drank tea. None of it was fresh and sometimes you could get sick.

As for food we were given kasha, oatmeal, canned fish and meat, cabbage soup, and compote.

We were often served this mixture of grits and powdered potatoes. This stuff was really tasteless and sticky like glue. We also had tea, dry milk, and canned meat and vegetables.

Other respondents gave a more positive assessment. Some believed that the food was better than in units stationed across the border:

The food was better in the DRA than in the training unit. We were fed potatoes with bits of beef, buckwheat porridge, fresh bread, cocoa, butter, sugar, canned meat, and fish. Sometimes they mixed peas with the potatoes.

The food in the DRA was normal. In fact, in Kandahar it was better than in the USSR. We had cream and coffee in the morning, though there was a lack of fresh products.

In general, securing adequate provisions, except water, for the expeditionary forces does not seem to be much of a problem. Serious disruptions and shortages do occur from time to time, though, when large supply convoys are ambushed.

A more salient problem affecting morale is the pervasive sense of isolation and boredom that permeates the troops. Soviet servicemen are not allowed any home leave in the two years they serve in the DRA, and they almost never go on town leave either. There is little entertainment, except for Soviet TV in the larger garrisons and stale patriotic movies, usually with anti-Basmachi themes. We were told, however, of some notable exceptions. A DShB serviceman at the Soviet base at Samarkhel recalled seeing fairly recent American movies such as "The Deep" and "The Deer Hunter." The servicemen are also irritated by the strict prohibition of any discussion of life and service in Afghanistan in letters to loved ones—a rule rigidly enforced by the military censor. It is no wonder that under these circumstances many servicemen turn to drugs and alcohol.

## DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

Among the various trends observed in the Soviet armed forces in Afghanistan, perhaps the most surprising is the widespread use of drugs. Until the invasion of Afghanistan, drug abuse in the Soviet army was considered by most analysts to be negligible or even nonexistent. Except for occasional smoking of marijuana by Central Asian conscripts, no significant drug usage was observed.<sup>22</sup> Today, a dramatic change has occurred, at least among the forces stationed in Afghanistan. There is good reason to believe that a majority, perhaps even a substantial majority, of the Soviet soldiers in the DRA use drugs on a fairly regular basis. All of our respondents, without exception, agreed that drugs have become a daily part of life for many in Afghanistan. Indeed, most of the interviewees admitted having taken drugs themselves. The three most popular substances were said to be hashish (*plan*), opium (*khan* or *chars*), and marijuana (*anasha*). Also growing in popularity are heroin, which is injected, and a heroin-like

<sup>22</sup>A RAND interview project involving some 140 former Soviet servicemen, most of whom had served in the early 1970s, revealed little or no awareness of drug problems in the Soviet army. See Alexiev and Wimbush (eds.), *Ethnic Minorities in the Red Army*, op. cit.

substance called *holmar*, which is extracted from poppy heads by boiling them. Another substance used for intoxication is an extremely concentrated form of tea known as *cheffir*. The following comments regarding drug use are typical:

In Jelaalabad most of the Soviet soldiers smoked drugs. Usually it was *chars* and *plan*. *Chars* they would smoke with a pipe and foil, *plan* they would put in cigarettes. About half of the soldiers smoked *plan* and about a fifth to a quarter would smoke *chars*. Most would smoke whatever they could get their hands on.

Drugs were very popular in Afghanistan. Mostly it was *plan*, *chars*, and *onasha* that were being used. At least half of our soldiers used drugs, and they would trade with the Afghans to get them.

Narcotics were used quite often out there. There was hashish and marijuana, which is made of some plant that resembles hemp. We would make cigarettes and smoke them. I used to do that too. Almost all of the soldiers smoked. In our platoon, out of thirty men only four did not smoke.

Almost all of the old-timers smoked narcotics in the unit, but the young ones less so. I would say about half of the people smoked *chars* and *plan*. It affected you much in the same manner as vodka except that by the next morning you would be okay.

Most people smoked, but in 1986 many started shooting with the needles that we have in our first aid kit. Some were also brewing *holmar* from poppies they had stolen from the Afghans during operations.

Most of the former soldiers believed that drugs were used so widely simply because they were cheap and easily available, while vodka was not. Many, however, also saw drugs as a convenient escape from the dreary life and boredom or the traumatic experiences they were subjected to:

Most soldiers smoke hashish and opium because they are bored. There is nothing to do over there, nothing to entertain yourself with . . . it's just torture, nothing else.

You take drugs because when you smoke you don't care about anything else at all. Life becomes easy for you.



Yes, we did smoke hashish because your consciousness changes when you take hashish. It is no longer so frightening to die. You just become sort of indifferent.

Despite the great extent of drug use, the officers do not seem to have been overly concerned. Occasionally soldiers caught smoking openly or during operations were sent to the brig for a day or two, but most of the time, the officers looked the other way, according to our respondents, even in cases of obvious addiction.

It is difficult to assess the overall implications of drug use by the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, but its impact is undoubtedly felt in a number of areas. Combat performance has surely been affected negatively, although it is not certain to what extent. Several former soldiers, for instance, had participated in combat operations while under the influence of drugs. Others recalled that many drivers smoked regularly while operating their vehicles. One truck driver mentioned that he had considerable problems with depth perception and judging distance when he was high and believed that many road accidents were caused by drug intoxication. The need to procure drugs on a regular basis for those who have become habituated is also said to be the driving force behind the widespread theft and pilferage of military property, including weapons and ammunition, taking place in Afghanistan (theft is discussed in detail below).

The longer-term impact on Soviet society is also a factor worth considering. It stands to reason that at least a fraction of Soviet veterans from Afghanistan return home psychologically or physically dependent on drugs. Opium and heroin, in particular, are highly addictive. At least half a million Soviet youth exposed to drugs while serving in Afghanistan have now been demobilized, and the impact of their experience is likely to be felt. Indeed, recent Soviet revelations of a serious drug abuse problem in the country may not be totally unrelated to the Afghan experience.<sup>23</sup>

Although the Soviet media have not yet acknowledged the existence of drug abuse among Soviet troops in Afghanistan, increasing references are being made to the alarming spread of drug addiction among draft-age youth. According to official Soviet sources, drug addiction among Soviet students in 1986 was triple that in 1985.<sup>24</sup> There have also been increasing references to drug use in military units in the

<sup>23</sup>There has been a veritable deluge of articles on drug addiction in the Soviet press since the subject ceased to be taboo in the spring of 1986. For some representative pieces, see D. Onipov, "Operatsiya opium," *Pravda vostoka*, August 30, 1986; Igor Korolkov, "A kogda oglyaneshya," *Sobesednik*, No. 40, September 1986; and "Dangerous Weakness: Narcotics and Drug Addicts," *Literaturnaya gazeta*, August 20, 1986.

<sup>24</sup>See "Rosoviye ochki," *Sovetskaya Byelorussiya*, July 10, 1987.

Soviet Union. In September 1987, an article in *Krasnaya zvezda* stated that "at times young people enter the army that already know the taste of narcotics." It also revealed that there have been cases of marijuana cultivation inside military bases.<sup>25</sup> Although drug use is on the upswing throughout the country, it was undoubtedly the Soviet experience in Afghanistan that prompted the author of this article to sound this alarm to his readers:

Yes, drug addiction is frightening anywhere and under any circumstances. But in the army and in the navy, with their formidable weapons and complex technology, drug addiction simply presents an extraordinary danger.

In comparison with drugs, alcohol appears to play a more limited role among the rank-and-file in Afghanistan than is traditional for the Soviet army. The main reason for this is the fact that vodka is extremely difficult to obtain, and it is very expensive when it can be found. Nonetheless, soldiers do drink whenever they get a chance and are often quite ingenious in finding alcoholic substances to consume.

Among the more innocent of these substances are different kinds of *samogon* (moonshine) spirits distilled in the unit. A kind of crude wine fermented in the barracks from local grapes is also indulged in. Very often, the lack of vodka and *samogon* leads to the consumption of exotic and health-endangering alcohol substitutes that are easily available. These range from cologne to brake fluid. Here is how one of our respondents described the drinking habits of his fellow soldiers:

You cannot imagine what they drink. They will drink shaving lotions and cologne. That's good stuff. Then they will drink toothpaste. The best one is the Bulgarian Pomorin brand. They will simply squeeze four or five tubes in a jar, dilute it with water and drink it. They also drank truck antifreeze, glue, and brake fluid. The brake fluid they used to heat up and put some nails in it for some reason. I don't know why. They will also take shoe polish and smear it on a piece of bread and leave it in the sun until the alcohol separates from the shoe polish. Then you eat the bread and get drunk.

Excessive drinking seems to be more widespread among the officer corps and the professional NCOs, who are evidently much better supplied and able to afford vodka. Virtually all of our interviewees had observed officers and *praporshchiks* drunk in the evenings and sometimes even during the day. The extent to which drinking affects the performance or morale of the command personnel, however, cannot easily be determined.

<sup>25</sup>V. Chupakhin, "Anasha v konverte," *Krasnaya zvezda*, September 4, 1987.

## THEFT AND CORRUPTION

Apart from its direct impact on discipline and performance, pervasive drug usage seems to be also the primary causal factor for rampant theft and pilferage of military equipment. Theft of state property and other corrupt practices are traditional in the Soviet army, as they are in Soviet society at large. Considerable light has been recently thrown on such underhanded dealings in the armed forces in connection with Gorbachev's campaign against "unearned income."<sup>26</sup> Pilferage in the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, however, appears to have assumed a mass character, far surpassing what could be deemed a tolerable level of malfessance. It is also a problem with operational relevance, to the extent that much of the stolen military materiel eventually finds its way into the hands of the resistance. All of our respondents were aware of theft and black-market activities with the Afghan population; most had actively participated in them.

The most common practice involves selling or trading military goods and equipment for drugs and food. Military goods stolen and sold or bartered include boots, blankets, spare parts, tires, construction materials, gasoline, and even weapons and ammunition. According to our respondents:

Our soldiers would try to sell anything they could in order to get extra money and drugs. They would steal and sell to the Afghans spare parts, tires, cooking pots, and even cartridges.

In my unit, which was guarding the *komendatura* in Kabul, we had a lot of vehicles, so we sold gasoline mostly but also boots and uniforms. I smoked hashish so I needed the money.

In the *stroibat*, we had lots of building materials and we used to sell them all the time. I got caught and the lieutenant wanted me to sign a paper that I would not do it any more. Well, it so happened that one day I sold construction materials again and he caught me again. That was when we were on a trip and he told me that when we returned to Kabul, he would put me in jail. That's when I ran away.

My friend and I were heavily involved in the sale of ammunition to the Afghans. Mostly we did business with the Baluchi in Kandahar. We even sold them some of the single-shot RPGs. We had over 34,000 afghani at one time. We had several soldiers and officers in our unit who were caught selling weapons and ammunition. They were all put in jail for 6 to 10 years.

<sup>26</sup>For a recent example detailing a wide variety of illegal activities in the Soviet army, see "Netrudoviiim dokhodam—zashlon," *Krasnaya zvezda*, November 20, 1986.

We smoked *chairs* every day and got it from the Afghans in exchange for gasoline and ammunition. We sold diesel fuel from the tank almost every day. Sometimes we would exchange also for money and food such as melons and grapes. They also wanted uniforms and boots. I sold ammunition very often; once I even got some American chewing gum for it.

The willingness of the Soviet soldiers to steal and sell just about anything of value from their units was confirmed by both resistance sources and Afghan army officers. Interviewed mujahideen commanders maintained that it was often easier, as well as cheaper, to buy weapons and ammunition from the Soviet troops than to go through legitimate sources. Though the quantities traded are usually small, occasionally substantial transactions do take place. Thus a commander operating in Logar province claimed, in an interview with the author, to be in a position to buy AK-74 ammunition by the box and on fairly short notice through civilian intermediaries.

A Soviet soldier who served in Ghazni provided indirect confirmation of such large-scale pilferage:

I didn't sell cartridges myself, but I know that other people did it. We used to take our garbage to a dump outside the territory of the regiment. Then the commander prohibited us from taking the trash there because some soldiers had arranged with the Afghans to leave boxes with ammunition there. The Afghans would pick them up at night.

Former Afghan officers reported that trafficking in stolen Soviet equipment was so widespread that a regular bazaar specializing in such items had been established in Kabul:

The Russians would steal anything from their bases and sell it cheaply to the Afghans. A special bazaar called the Russian bazaar was set up in the Pul-e Bag-e Umoomi area of Kabul, where you could buy all kinds of equipment, spare parts, tires, jacks, bayonets, and even arms under the table.

The Russians had no discipline and would sell anything behind the backs of their officers. A number of shops were opened in Pul-e Bag-e Umoomi that traded mostly in Russian goods and equipment. You could always find Russian soldiers there selling goods and buying hashish.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup>A recent article in the literary weekly *Literaturnaya gazeta* confirms the availability of stolen Soviet goods in Kabul bazaars. In a discussion of pilferage of Soviet civilian aid to the Afghan regime, the author states: "Even more unpleasant is the fact that in (Kabul) stores you can sometimes find our *telnyashki* and different types of ammunition." (Kim Selikhov, "Afghanistan: trudnim putyom," *Literaturnaya gazeta*, October 14, 1987.)

Although acquiring drugs is the primary reason for the theft and embezzlement, it is not the only one. For many soldiers and officers, the opportunity to obtain Western consumer goods is also a powerful incentive for illegal transactions. Such opportunities readily present themselves, since Afghan bazaars offer an assortment of goods unheard of in the Soviet Union. Particularly sought after are jeans, cassette players, and assorted stereo equipment. Surprisingly, Soviet military stores (*voentorg*) in Afghanistan also offer a much greater variety of Western consumer goods than such stores elsewhere. Discharged soldiers are allowed to shop there for jeans, briefcases, and Japanese transistor radios, among other goods.

Goods acquired through black-market activities, however, have to be brought back to the Soviet Union illegally, which has evidently given rise to large-scale smuggling. The easiest way to smuggle illegally obtained goods, according to the interviewees, was to make a deal with an officer—an indication that corruption has not bypassed the officer corps. Several cases of organized smuggling of large shipments of narcotics have come to light. In one case, three Soviet officers were executed for ostensibly heading a ring involved in the smuggling of Western goods inside the zinc coffins used to transport the remains of Soviet servicemen.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps even more disturbing, from the authorities' point of view, is the increasing evidence of arms smuggling from Afghanistan. A report on the work of Soviet customs officials at Kushka, one of the two major entry points along the Soviet-Afghan border, acknowledges that "attempts to bring weapons and explosives into our country are not infrequent."<sup>29</sup>

In a few cases, misappropriation of army equipment is motivated not by material gain or drug needs, but by alienation and disloyalty. Most such cases have involved servicemen who had already decided to defect and had established contact with the mujahideen to that end. For a period of time prior to their actual desertion, such individuals, several of whom were in our sample, supplied the mujahideen with weapons and ammunition as a way of establishing their sincerity and assuring resistance cooperation. One of the interviewees, who later fought on the mujahideen side for more than two years, recalled supplying the resistance with over 5,000 rifle cartridges, 200 hand grenades, and several Kalashnikovs.

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<sup>28</sup>Agence France Press, December 20, 1983.

<sup>29</sup>See Yu. Stepanov and V. Mirzoyan, "Na samoi yuzhnoi tamozhne," *Turkmen'skaya izbra*, April 9, 1987. Arms smuggling is mentioned also in an interview with Soviet customs chief Vladimir Bazovskii published in *Prauda*, August 23, 1987.

## LOOTING AND ATROCITIES

Trading of purloined military property is not the only manner in which Soviet servicemen acquire desired goods in Afghanistan. Plunder and looting have become a regular part of the darker side of the Soviet war effort in Afghanistan. Such activities take place most often in conjunction with operations and are commonplace. Most of our respondents who had participated in operations were familiar with the practice. Some had apparently indulged in it themselves, as reported in the following statements:

There were very many cases of plunder of Afghan homes by our soldiers. For example, during combat operations we would go through a village and take anything we wanted. We would simply go in and say, "Give me hashish," or whatever else. If the Afghan refuses, they might kill him.

It was quite common to take things from the Afghans. We called it "balaish" (bribe), but it was really robbery. You would see something in the house like a cassette recorder and just take it. You just need to point to what you want and they would give it to you, because they are afraid that you will kill them.

Looting took place during combing operations in the *kishloks*. Most often the soldiers would look for money and jewelry. Even though the Afghan peasants are very poor, the women have a lot of gold jewelry. The officers also did it and sometimes they ordered the soldiers to steal for them.

Preying upon the civilian population occurs also during roadblock searches, in the course of which Soviet soldiers reportedly take anything they want from Afghan travelers and traders. Several mujahideen interviewees believed that plunder was a more important motivation for personnel manning the roadblocks than security checks, which were said to be often perfunctory. Yet another source of booty for the Soviets was the refugee caravans moving to Pakistan. As a rule, these were indiscriminately attacked whenever they were discovered, and they were subjected to pillage afterwards.

Such activities are generally symptomatic of a Soviet military behavior characterized by unusual brutality and blatant disregard for internationally accepted norms and conventions of warfare conduct. Among the areas in which such misconduct has been demonstrated repeatedly are failure to differentiate between civilians and combatants, reprisals against the civilian population, taking and execution of hostages, summary executions of prisoners of war, and systematic use of

torture.<sup>30</sup> Soviet policies in this respect are marked by a distinct dichotomy. Such misconduct is not only officially tolerated but, in fact, encouraged during the course of authorized operations, but it is frowned upon and, at times, punished severely, if pursued in an unauthorized, "freelance" manner. We were given countless examples of every aspect of Soviet misconduct. Most of the former servicemen who had participated in operations were told not to differentiate between mujahideen and civilians and to assume that all Afghans without exception are hostile and should be treated accordingly in operational zones.<sup>31</sup> A guard at the Kabul *komendatura* was given orders to shoot anybody approaching the security perimeter, regardless of age or gender. Another soldier was told to shoot women wearing the *chaddor*, since they could be disguised mujahideen. A third respondent recalled being instructed by his platoon commander prior to attacking an Afghan village:

There are very few people left from the local population there. Those that are there are all *dushmans* and should be killed. Those that are too small to fight help the *dushmans* anyway, and the old ones will kill you too.

Indiscriminate slaughter of Afghan villagers often occurred in reprisals for attacks on Soviet units or the death of Soviet soldiers. Most respondents had stories similar to the ones below:<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup>The wholesale abuses of human rights and international conventions by the Soviet army and its client regime in Afghanistan have been exhaustively documented in a number of investigative reports by international organizations and commissions of inquiry. See in particular *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan Prepared by the Special Rapporteur, Mr. Felix Ermacora, In Accordance with Commission on Human Rights Resolution 1985/55*, United Nations Economic and Social Council, February 19, 1986; *Amnesty International Report 1986*, London, November 19, 1986; "Mission to Afghanistan and Pakistan," Report by the International Humanitarian Inquiry Commission on Displaced Persons in Afghanistan, published in *Central Asian Survey*, Incidental Paper Series, No. 4, September-November 1986; and "Report of the Independent Council on International Human Rights on the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan," Washington, D.C., November 17, 1987.

<sup>31</sup>A careful between-the-lines reading of the Soviet media can occasionally also provide glimpses into these Soviet attitudes. For instance, the press has reported that Soviet units set up ambushes at night, mine popular caravan routes, and open fire on anybody moving on the trails, despite the fact that refugee pack trains are frequent users. "Because of the cunning of the mujahideen," argues a Soviet writer, Soviet soldiers are inclined to "see everyone as an enemy." (M. Guralakii, "Paren s nashego zavoda," *Komsomolskiy Uzbekistan*, August 8, 1986.)

<sup>32</sup>Direct evidence that the Soviets consider reprisals and threats of reprisals as an integral part of their military strategy in Afghanistan is furnished by a Soviet letter (in Russian with Dari translation) addressed to a prominent mujahideen commander in the Herat area. (The letter is in the possession of the author of this report.) It is a typical combination of the stick-and-carrot approach normally used prior to carrying out

We were struck by our own cruelty in Afghanistan. We executed innocent peasants. If one of ours was killed or wounded, we would kill women, children, and old people as a revenge. We killed everything, even the animals.

I was on a military mission for eighteen days. I had to go hungry and to carry corpses. You know, so many soldiers in our company died that it was horrible. They shot my best friend, so afterwards we went through the houses and shot all the residents one after the other: women, children, everybody.

Once they entered a village where only old men and women with children were left, because whenever we went on a search-and-destroy mission all the able-bodied men had left the villages. The lieutenant ordered his platoon to herd all these women, children, and old men together into one room and throw in hand grenades.<sup>33</sup>

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reprisals. The letter reads:

I, the commander of the Soviet forces, responsible for the peace, calm and security of the peaceful population in the Herat zone, turn to you Ghulam Yahia and for the last time authoritatively declare:

1. If the attacks on convoys, outposts, and peaceful citizens, during the distribution of free aid to them, continue from your zone, I will be forced to take the necessary measures. Via loudspeakers I will inform the peaceful citizens and bring them out of Siah Vashan. After that, I will carry out 1,000 air and artillery strikes on Siah Vashan, and following that, I will bring in my troops and level it to the ground.

2. In order to avoid the unnecessary bloodshed, I am prepared to meet with you and solve all questions at the negotiating table.

With respect, Commander of Soviet Forces

<sup>33</sup>These stories of atrocities related by former Soviet soldiers are remarkably similar to stories that were told by Afghan villagers to investigators from the International Humanitarian Inquiry Commission on Displaced Persons in Afghanistan during interviews inside Afghanistan in late 1985. Here are several examples:

We were attacked three times. In the village of Gharao Qyahlaq, 420 people were killed in the month of Jeddi (Capricorn, December 22, 1984, to January 20, 1985)—the women, the children, the old. They entered the village with 60 tanks. They poured gasoline on the houses and burned them; they shot down the cattle with machine-guns; they killed the chickens; they even slaughtered the dogs. The Russians burned our mosque and trampled upon the Koran. I myself buried the dead with the help of people from the other two villages. Sometimes only halves of bodies were left. And sometimes only heads, cut off. We buried twenty women with bullets in their heads.

No one is left in Gorgorak, there is no way to go back there, it will return to a wild state (literally, *jungle*, "jungle"). In the attack itself, 300 people were killed. The Afghan Communists showed them the pathway, and the Russians did the work.



Sometimes the atrocities against the Afghans take grotesque and sadistic forms. A number of truly horrifying incidents were recounted to us:

One of the atrocities that I witnessed personally took place on the day of the October Revolution anniversary. We caught four Afghans who were tied, laid on the road, and run over with a BMP. One of the Afghans was a priest with a beard and they spared him. But the next morning the officer ordered one of the soldiers to pour gasoline over him and set him on fire. The soldier couldn't do it and started screaming. The officer got really upset and said, "I've had enough of this. Watch how it's done." And he grabbed the Afghan by the throat and slit it. Then he ordered the soldier to castrate him and make him "clean as a cherub."

One time we captured about a dozen or so youths who had only two bird guns with them. We thought of giving them to KHAD. We didn't really care. But our company commander Rudenko wouldn't let us. He was so drunk he was blue in the face and couldn't stand. Then there was this sergeant Dombrovski from Moldavia. He was [so rotten] that nobody spoke to him. He had no brains but was very strong. So he tied them hand and foot, undressed them, and lined them up on the road not too far from our base. Then the commander ordered people to run them over with the BMPs. Seryozha said he couldn't do it. And the captain said, "Comrade soldier, what do you mean you couldn't do it?" And he called on another soldier, "Misha, show him how to love the motherland." And they drove the three BMPs over them and completely crushed them. And then Misha got out and ran away and started throwing up. Then Rudenko started shouting, "Come on, get rid of all this meat, clean it up." Afterwards, the soldiers kept vomiting and had to smoke drugs and drink to come to their senses.

The commanding officer of our platoon was Senior Lieutenant Gevorkyan, who, by the time I arrived, had already served in Afghanistan for about a year. He used to say that he had become inured to everything and could kill anyone in cold blood, adding that his main goal was to train his troops to do the same. Once he brought a fourteen-year-old Afghan kid to our unit and explained that this was a *dushman* who had tried to escape from our soldiers. Well, we had a soldier by the name of Sotnik who was terrified of blood. And it was Sotnik whom Gevorkyan ordered to cut the boy's throat. Sotnik trembled all over, but he managed to get hold of himself and approached the boy with a knife. But he couldn't force himself to do

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Preliminary bombing of this village (Charkh) in Logar caused 45 deaths. When Soviet soldiers entered the village, they pillaged survivors of valuables: wristwatches, cash, carpets, jewelry, radio sets, and the like. Then the soldiers deteriorated the village's food supply by defecating in the flour bins.

(*Central Asian Survey, Incidental Paper Series, No. 4, op. cit., pp. 4-28.*)

more than prick the boy's chest. "You weakling," shouted Gevorkyan, "I'll show you how to do it." He snatched Sotnik's knife, kicked the boy in the face and stabbed him twice in the throat. We just stood there unable to say anything.

We had this sergeant who was always given as an example of a good soldier and the best in the company. He was a complete idiot and a sadist. Once he broke the arms of six Afghans that we had arrested. He would have them stand next to the BMP and reach inside with their arm. Then he would slam the hatch door, which weighed about two hundred kilos, and completely crush the arm.

There is also overwhelming evidence, from both the interview information and former Afghan officers, that resistance combatants captured by the Soviets are almost always summarily executed upon interrogation. Torture is said to be frequently used in such interrogations.<sup>34</sup>

While such brutalities have become an integral part of Soviet conduct in Afghanistan, military authorities are evidently concerned that such unprofessional behavior, if unchecked, could lead to a serious breakdown of discipline. As a result, severe penalties are occasionally imposed for looting, rape, and random violence against the civilian population when committed during unauthorized forays by soldiers. Punishment could and did include court-martial and even execution in more aggravated cases. We were given a number of examples. The following is representative of the kind of circumstances under which Soviet soldiers are punished for crimes against the civilian population:

Three soldiers from the reconnaissance company went to a *kishlak* and saw some girls there. They had them in turn. But then an old man and a boy saw them. So they shot the girls and they shot the old man as well, but the boy ran away. They thought they had killed him too but he managed to jump through the window and he told the Soviets. The next day, during formation, that boy identified them all. Then they were brought to Termez, tried, and shot.

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<sup>34</sup>It should be noted that the Soviet Union was the first European signatory of the U.N.-sponsored international convention against torture. (UPI, December 26, 1985.)

## IV. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The impact of the factors examined in this study is felt in a number of areas related to the discipline, morale, and cohesion of the Soviet armed forces in Afghanistan. Ultimately, such factors affect combat performance. Some, such as health problems and drugs, affect combat performance directly. Others, such as antagonistic personnel relations or ethnic tensions, undermine unit cohesion and have a less obvious, but nonetheless very real, impact. Still others, such as blatantly implausible indoctrination or the commission of atrocities, erode motivation. It is, however, very difficult to assess the magnitude of the impact of these factors, let alone their specific effect on Soviet operational capabilities. What is clear is that their combined effect has been substantial. Over most of the past eight years, the Soviet army in Afghanistan has proved neither a well-disciplined nor a highly motivated force. Military performance, though credible in some cases, as in the counterinsurgency area, has been indifferent in general and, at times, poor. As resistance military skills and weapons have improved, especially since the introduction of effective antiaircraft missiles in late 1986, Soviet performance has actually declined. These trends have created the strong impression that after eight years in combat, the Soviet forces in Afghanistan have bogged down in a military stalemate. By late 1987, their prospects of winning appeared distant and receding further.

One area in which the impact can be observed directly is discipline. All evidence indicates that discipline in Soviet units in Afghanistan leaves much to be desired, certainly for a modern military establishment under conditions of war. Specific discipline infractions range from nonregulation dress and open disregard of regulations to absence without leave and insubordination. Even the most egregious transgressions against military regulations, such as fragging and desertions, appear to be fairly common. More than a hundred Soviet servicemen are known to have successfully defected to the mujahideen. How many more have tried but failed is a matter of conjecture, but all of our respondents knew of defections from their own units. In taking this extreme and nearly suicidal step, the vast majority of deserters, with some notable exceptions, have been motivated not by political alienation from the Soviet system, but simply by what they considered unbearable conditions. One indication of Soviet concern about this situation is the fact that the locations of mines placed around a

garrison's perimeter are not made known to the soldiers, even if that occasionally leads to serious accidents. Thus the mines not only keep the mujahideen out, but also effectively keep the soldiers in.

There are, further, at least two dozen documented cases of Soviet soldiers joining the resistance and fighting against their erstwhile countrymen.<sup>1</sup> This in itself is remarkable: The mujahideen neither encourage Soviet defections nor have much use for them, since keeping Soviet defectors or prisoners is extremely hazardous—Soviet military authorities go out of their way to hunt them down and kill them.

There is also scattered evidence of open and even organized insubordination. We were told of two cases in which platoon-sized units essentially went on strike because of being served rotten food. More serious are incidents of refusal to fight on an individual and even a group basis.<sup>2</sup> An indirect admission that such cases may not be isolated is given in a recent issue of the widely read organ of the Main Political Administration *Agitator armii i flota* (Agitator of the Army and the Navy), which provides guidance to military political workers. Describing an ambush of people said to be bandits, but who in fact appear to have been unarmed civilians, a soldier describes some soldiers' failure to carry out orders:

All of a sudden, I saw that several (soldiers) were not shooting. What was the problem? It turned out that they couldn't shoot at a person from such a close distance. Just like that. It was necessary to conduct explanatory work with them.<sup>3</sup>

Despite poor discipline and indifferent morale, the Soviets have been able to prevent serious erosion of their combat capabilities and have, in some cases, enhanced overall performance. They have done so by means of specific force employment policies emphasizing the combat role of the elite counterinsurgency forces and minimizing the relative input of the regular and support forces, i.e., the forces that are particularly plagued with morale and discipline problems. They have also been able to preclude any large-scale tendency toward collaboration with the enemy, through a massive and often successful psychological

<sup>1</sup>Five of our respondents fought in the resistance for more than two years. A top mujahideen commander claimed in a conversation with the author in late 1984 that a group of former Soviet Muslim soldiers, led by an ex-officer, operated against the Soviets in northern Afghanistan. In the fall of 1985, an American correspondent interviewed five former Soviet soldiers fighting in mujahideen ranks deep inside Afghanistan. (See Arthur Bonner, "Five Defectors, Turned Afghan, Fight 'Holy War'," *The New York Times*, November 1, 1985.)

<sup>2</sup>In January 1986, twenty Soviet soldiers were reportedly executed for refusal to fight in the city of Kandahar. (See *The New York Times*, January 15, 1986.)

<sup>3</sup>Captain I. Koshel, "Dva boitsa," *Agitator armii i flota*, No. 15, August 1987.

campaign to instill hatred for the Afghans among the troops. As part of this campaign, the mujahideen have been persistently portrayed as subhuman savages that severely torture and mutilate their prisoners before they kill them.<sup>4</sup> Yet the relative success of the Soviets in these areas has been due at least as much to external factors as to their own efforts. For example, a major, if indirect, contributing factor to the significant improvement of Soviet counterinsurgency operations, which depend to a large extent on unimpeded air support, was the failure of Western resistance supporters to supply effective antiaircraft weapons for the first seven years of the war. Soviet counterinsurgency effectiveness began to deteriorate rapidly after Stinger missiles were introduced in the mujahideen arsenal in late 1986.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Soviet ability to prevent an even more serious deterioration of morale has been facilitated by the inability of the resistance to exploit Soviet vulnerabilities by means of psychological warfare. Here again, Western supporters of the resistance bear a distinct responsibility. One of the main reasons for the mujahideen reluctance to take prisoners and encourage defections is the inexplicable unwillingness of Western governments, including the United States, to grant political asylum and humanitarian assistance to Soviet defectors. Many of the former soldiers interviewed for this study had waited as long as four years to be accepted as refugees by a Western country.

A number of implications for the West can be drawn from the analysis of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan is a unique conflict, the lessons of which are not readily applicable to another involvement, let alone an East-West confrontation. The Soviet experience, nonetheless, is likely to affect Soviet political and military thinking in a number of ways. It is, for instance, likely that the Soviet leadership will be much more reluctant to contemplate a similar adventure in a place where they can expect a similar response, such as Iran or Pakistan.

Many of the Soviet strengths and weaknesses that have been manifested in Afghanistan are conflict-specific and of limited relevance to a war in Central Europe. Still, apart from specific operational shortcomings that are outside the scope of this study, the Soviet war conduct has revealed a number of possible systemic vulnerabilities that should be closely scrutinized by Western analysts. These include the

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<sup>4</sup>One of the most effective methods used in this hate indoctrination is said to be the occasional display of a mutilated corpse, allegedly that of a Soviet soldier who fled to the mujahideen.

<sup>5</sup>For a more detailed account of this aspect of the conflict, see Alexander Alexiev, *The United States and the War in Afghanistan*, The RAND Corporation, P-7395, January 1988.

surprisingly poor performance of the military political indoctrination and propaganda apparatus in preparing Soviet troops for service in Afghanistan; pervasive problems in personnel relations and intractable, perhaps worsening, ethnic cleavages; the deficient performance of the military medical service; and widespread corruption. These problems are not unique to the Soviet armed forces, but they are systemic in nature and deeply rooted in Soviet society itself. Thus it is not likely that they can be solved expeditiously. The possibility of developing promising Western exploitation strategies along these lines should, therefore, be carefully weighed.

Finally, the analysis provides some general insights into Soviet military/political behavior in an armed conflict. The demonstrated Soviet willingness to pursue a military *modus operandi* in open contravention to a number of internationally accepted norms of military conduct and agreements, such as the Geneva Conventions, is perhaps the most disturbing finding. At the very least, it is an indication that in a conflict, the West could not confidently expect the Soviets to abide by international treaties and agreements they have signed, if military imperatives dictate otherwise.

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